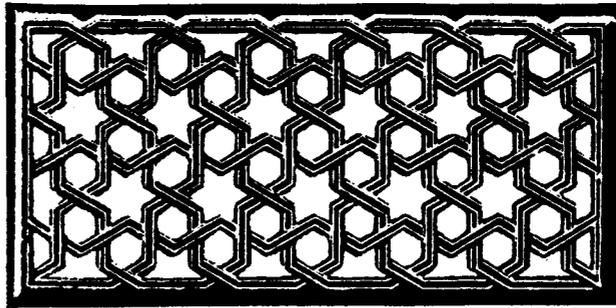POLICY FOCUS

# DECISION MAKING
# IN ASAD'S SYRIA

## EYAL ZISSER

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## RESEARCH MEMORANDUM

Cover and title page illustrations from windows of
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# The Author

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# Contents

# Executive Summary

Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad is one of the most prominent, successful, and enigmatic leaders in the Middle East. His reclusiveness, obstinacy, and hesitancy when making foreign policy decisions has led many Syria-watchers to view Asad as a powerful and skilled negotiator. The goal of this study is to explore the decision-making process of Asad's Syria to elucidate how policy is actually made in Damascus. This involves examining several points, including the coalition of forces that constitutes the regime and affords it power; the long-time, active participants and the considerations that guide them; and the role of public opinion in the decision-making process. This paper looks into these points with respect to negotiations with Israel and also regarding a number of other concerns preoccupying Asad, including the issues of succession, economic and political "openness," and the overall direction of the country's foreign policy. A discussion of the above issues should provide a more comprehensive picture of both Asad and Syria.

Asad's rule has been an arduous fight for survival against domestic and foreign challenges—a struggle that explains his desire for consensus prior to making decisions. His regime may be described as brutally dictatorial, representing only the interests of a small sector of the population—the 'Alawi community to which he himself belongs—but whereas 'Alawis do make up a strong proportion of Asad's support base, surrounding them are other groups that reflect broader *Syrian* realities: Sunnis from the rural areas; non-'Alawi minorities such as Christians, Druze, and Isma'ilis; and the Sunni economic elite, especially that of Damascus. It is this coalition of forces whose representatives hold key political and economic positions and form the regime's social upper class.

Asad's regime, more so than those of his predecessors, truly reflects the social fabric of Syria. Nevertheless, the cohesion of the coalition underpinning the regime rests on two conditions. One is Asad's ability to make the various components feel that they are partners in running the state by satisfying, at least in part, their social and economic needs. The other is his ability to sustain a clear balance of power between the participants in the coalition—that is to say, by maintaining a clearly marked preponderance of 'Alawis in the army and the security services.

The dual power system that governs Syria satisfies both conditions. The formal system of government reflects the numerical strength of the coalition's components: Most cabinet ministers, members of the People's Assembly, and deputies to the Party Congress are Sunnis. Contrasting with this structure, there exists the hidden side of the regime: the informal power exercised mainly by the heads of the security services and by senior army officers—in short, the men on whom the regime depends for its stability and its future—the vast majority of whom are 'Alawis. The formal government apparatus is likewise arranged along two parallel lines: the administration and the party. It falls to the Ba'th party to try to mitigate the inherent contradiction between the formal and the informal government elites. Yet, the party apparatus has not always been able to assert its superiority over the military or to act as an effective moderator between the civilian elite and the senior officers. Against the background of this structure, Asad's personal role stands out all the more strongly.

This paper makes clear, however, that Asad is not alone at the top and does not act in a vacuum. The key to joining the inner circle, and the yardstick of a person's importance once he is inside it, is closeness to Asad. Four kinds of such ties can be discerned: family ties, tribal or communal ties, personal friendship, and ties created by working together. Individuals in all four categories have certain characteristics in common: All belong to one sector or another of the governing coalition and they thus represent the political, social, and economic order on which Asad's regime was built and on which it continues to rest; most are the same age as Asad; and almost all members of the inner circle

made their way up in either the army or the party. Nonetheless, the four groups are not necessarily coherent, and all the people at the top depend on Asad, who can promote or demote them at will or draw them closer or keep them more removed from power. At the same time as they depend on him, however, Asad depends on them for their personal support and the support of their constituencies. The overall picture that emerges is thus one of symbiosis.

The nature of the decision-making process in Syria is thus a function of the structure of Syrian rule and its peculiarities. Asad himself is reluctant to make decisions. When he finally does, the decisions are usually in reaction to others, or they follow from constraints or from situations offering no alternative. Hence, defensiveness is another recurring feature, as are caution, suspicion, and a level of hesitancy that borders on obsessive. Asad's personality also has a deeply conservative strain, and his world view is quite narrow. All the above traits help to explain why Asad is stronger on tactics than on strategy. His lack of realistic strategic planning for the long term is largely the corollary of the way his mind works.

Asad claims to be committed to the basic tenets of the Ba'th ideology. Yet for all the genuineness of the ideological commitment, when Asad must make actual policy choices, his doctrine finds itself in conflict with his pragmatism. This tension explains the need of Asad and his inner establishment to ensure a broad popular consensus on every single step taken along the path toward making a major decision. The required appearance of legitimacy and honor is secured through constant consultations between Asad and the inner circle, through having other government institutions confirm or ratify decisions already made, and through intensive use of the government-controlled media. At the same time, it is worth noting that Western representatives who have been in touch with Asad often come away with the impression that his problem is not so much how to persuade his associates or how to win over broad public support; rather, his main problem is with himself: How can he avoid making decisions that run counter to his beliefs and principles, and how can he keep his actions compatible with his broader world view? Obviously, he is neither able nor willing to act like Sadat did in surprising his own people by going to Jerusalem.

On the face of it, the combined effect of the structure of the regime and Asad's personality traits does not leave interlocutors much room to maneuver in negotiations. Yet, Asad's past record suggests that an informed and balanced combination of applying pressure and offering incentives is likely to bring results. Pressure, however, must be exerted with a full understanding of Asad's political constraints and personal limitations. Negotiators must therefore constantly keep the following considerations in mind: First, Asad's timeline differs from that of his interlocutors. Second, he often defers to Western negotiators who can act from a position of strength. Third, the Ba'th ideology places several constraints on Asad and the regime. Fourth, Asad feels the need to maintain an aspect of honor and legitimacy. Fifth, he does not make decisions in a vacuum. Sixth, he is generally reluctant to come forward with new or alternative options. Finally, the tone of comments in the country's media often reveals Syrian attitudes and aims and may often presage changes in both.

For all the difficulties involved, however, negotiations with Asad can bring results. Asad's relative advantage over his rivals derives from his astute understanding of his personal and political weaknesses. Western negotiators must demonstrate a political strength powerful enough to make Asad feel that opposing it might leave him with his back to the wall. This mixture has worked in the past; it is likely to do so again.

# I

## An Enigma?

Over the last quarter of a century, Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad has become one of the most prominent leaders in the Middle East. Under his rule, Syria has turned from a weak and unstable state into a regional power. Asad has been the subject of a number of studies seeking to explain why he succeeded where most if not all of his predecessors failed. Researchers have tried to probe Asad's character and personality to analyze his vision and worldview and relate them to actual Syrian policies and the degree of their success. Despite extensive research, however, Asad's mindset, motivations, and decision-making process—and thus Syria's as a whole—remain an enigma to many Western scholars, journalists, and government officials.

Asad's mysteriousness, along with his manifestly successful record and proven ability to maintain the stability of a country that, for some twenty-five years before him, had been a by-word for instability, have given him an image of possessing overawing leadership qualities, even an aura of omnipotence. This image has been systematically nurtured by some Western researchers, journalists, and officials who have been turned into admirers by the president's successes or who have mistaken the ambiance of mystery for the man himself. U.S. president Bill Clinton, for instance, was quoted in June 1996 as having said, "Of all the Middle East leaders I have met, I don't think anyone is smarter—as far as IQ is concerned—than President Asad. The man is brilliant."[1] But he felt constrained to add: "But . . . during the last three and a half years [i.e., during the abortive Syrian–Israeli negotiations], nobody has wasted such an IQ on such small issues. . . . He has missed critical opportunities which may never reappear."

Such words hardly fit with the above image; they open the way for analysts to question the extent to which Asad's successes were really the result of his own policy choices. One might then even move on to the "heretical" question of whether a different course, or a different leader, would have done Syria more good. After all, some twenty-five years after Asad's advent, Syria has remained a country in social and economic distress (which may still be deepening) and continues to be largely isolated on the international scene. The future of the country, and of the Ba'th party regime Asad has created, is as uncertain today as it was when he came to power.

These rather hypothetical questions are not the concern of the present study; rather, it shall review the decision-making process of Asad's Syria—how policy is actually made in Damascus. The importance of this issue is clear in view of two basic presuppositions common among Syria-watchers—ideas that this study examines critically and disputes. The first is that President Asad enjoys more control in discussions and thus also in decision making with respect to regional and Western leaders. Many of these Syria-watchers assume that Asad's supremacy derives from his power and his political and personal talents, and that it is sufficient to assure his victory in any dispute with foreign counterparts. The second presupposition, which in many ways follows directly from the first, is that it is difficult or even

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[1] David Makovsky, "Clinton: Assad is brilliant, but he may have lost his chance to get back the Golan," *Jerusalem Post*, June 13, 1996, p. 1.

impossible to influence the decision-making process in Asad's regime, as it is concentrated in the hands of one man, President Asad.

The basic premise of this study, however, is that Asad's relative advantage over his rivals and interlocutors derives not necessarily from his personal force and leadership or of the power of the country that he leads, but rather from his self-consciousness—one might say obsessiveness—regarding his personal and political weaknesses. He knows his limitations and takes them into account, which leads him to formulate policies that are cautious, restrained, and balanced. By understanding the mind of Asad, foreign policymakers may be able to influence the Syrian decision-making process—even if only in a partial and limited manner—by implementing an assertive policy of initiative. Asad often finds it difficult to provide a response to foreign initiatives, which might leave him in a position of clear inferiority to his rivals. One must also note that, although Asad's word is final in Syria, he does not act in a vacuum. At his side are supportive and assisting leaders on whom he relies and whose opinions he tends to value. Furthermore, Asad's regime reflects or expreses coalitions of intra-Syrian power foci on whose support it relies; thus, Asad tends to take Syrian public opinion into consideration—this too in an exaggerated manner. Therefore, a Western move pitched at Asad's peers in the leadership or at public opinion in Syria might influence the policy of Asad himself. Thus, some of the issues that have surfaced so far must be explored—Asad's character, the structure of and personalities in his regime, and his vision of the future— as well as the way policies evolve from them.

A good point of departure is the contradiction Clinton noted: how a highly talented leader let four years slip by without grasping the chance they offered for recovering the Golan Heights. The pivotal argument of this paper will be that the answer to the points at issue can be found not only in the negotiations, but also in the fashion in which Asad conducts state business and makes decisions. To put it differently, the contents of the talks—falling short as they did of Asad's demands and expectations— undeniably made it difficult for the Syrian president to bring them to a conclusion. No less obvious, some of Asad's basic conceptions of the nature of the conflict with Israel had the same effect. But neither can the fact be ignored that some of the obstacles emerging in the course of the negotiation had nothing to do with the substantive points under discussion. Rather, they stemmed from the basic nature of the Syrian regime and the personality and working methods of its leader. Their weight was sufficient to obstruct an agreement that would have been largely, though not totally, satisfactory to Damascus.

To elucidate the Syrian process of decision making, involving the conflict with Israel or any other issue, the following points should be examined: What is the coalition of forces making up the regime and affording it the power base on which it rests? What are its most essential elements? Who are its pivotal actors and what gives them the power they have? Finally, who are the active participants in the decision-making process and what considerations guide them? By listing the considerations governing the process, this paper will contrast the regime's world view and ideology with the degree of flexibility (if any) that these leave open for making varying policy choices. Yet another problem is that of public opinion: How far away can the regime afford to move from the presumed or actual attitudes of the Syrian public at large? These questions have a bearing on the issue of the regime's present and future stability—an issue ever present in the minds of its leaders.

These points will be reviewed not only with respect to the negotiations with Israel but also regarding a number of other concerns now preoccupying Asad. These include the thorny issue of succession, the question of economic and to some extent political "openness," and the overall direction of the country's foreign policy, especially toward the United States and the West as a whole. Such a broad view will lead

to a discussion of Syria's attitudes during the Gulf War as well. As shall be seen, Syria's activist stance and energetic involvement in that war seems to provide an exception for the general rules applying to Asad's methods of crisis management.

A discussion of the above issues might therefore provide a more comprehensive picture of Asad's advantages and disadvantages as a leader and his personal points of weakness and strength, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of Syria as a country. As noted above, Asad has managed to turn those weaknesses into advantages because of his obsessive awareness of them. Moreover, he is willing to and insists on taking these weaknesses into full consideration as he formulates and implements his policies. This dynamic is clearly his great advantage, but it is also a major blindspot. An awareness of Asad's weaknesses and difficulties, and an intelligent use of this awareness, are the keys to leading Asad to take the path desired by Western decision makers. Such an approach has been successful in the past and may be successful in the future as well.

# II

## Appearance and Reality: Syria's Decision-Making Structure

Shortly after the signing of the Oslo accords was announced, President Hafiz al-Asad advised Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasir Arafat to take more care of his personal safety. Asad immediately added that he did not wish to insinuate that Arafat might be assassinated, and he added that he himself was against political assassinations. But he said Arafat must know that a leader who is not attentive to the feelings of his people might find himself in conflict with them and may even be murdered by his would-be supporters.[1] It is true that many in Israel and in the West at large believe that Asad should have taken the path of such courageous and prophetic leaders as Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat, who opened new horizons to their peoples. Asad's point of view is obviously different, though, and in contrast to those leaders, Asad appears to be hesitant, cautious, and even conservative. Yet, whereas both Rabin and Sadat paid for their courage with their lives, Asad has survived. He is not a trailblazer, but he is hardly a blind follower, either. He is attentive to the consensus—both within Syria and in the Arab world at large—and he tries as best he can to operate according to it. This reflects the fact that Asad's is a representative regime that reflects the social and political forces in Syria and thus also the balance of power among them. His decision-making process, therefore, is the result of a dialogue that he takes care to maintain with the public in his country or, at the very least, the result of attention and attentiveness to the Syrian consensus. This is why the ideological, political, and social envelope within which Asad operates and in the context of which he makes his decisions is, in the end, of importance.

### TWO VIEWS OF ASAD AS DECISION MAKER

Asad's decision, in summer 1991, to join the Middle East peace process was probably a difficult one for him to take. It marked the first departure from Syria's traditional stance on the conflict with Israel. It set the country on the course of direct negotiations under U.S. sponsorship and carried it forward a long way toward achieving peace—even though the final goal was not reached and may currently prove more elusive than before.

This decision, as well as the one a year earlier to join the Gulf War coalition, was perceived by the government in Damascus as the inevitable consequence of changing regional and international circumstances—even, one might venture to say, of an existential distress triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union a short while before. Both decisions came in response to the need for a dialogue with the United States—a dialogue that, in the eyes of Syrian leaders, had now become imperative because of a

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[1] "al-Ra'is al-suri lil-Akhbar" (The Syrian President in an interview to *al-Akhbar*), *al-Akhbar*, September 20, 1993, p. 1.

perceived U.S. threat to the stability of their regime. To these anxieties must be added the positive prospect of recovering the Golan Heights and of underpinning Syrian hegemony in Lebanon.[2]

And yet, despite such obvious Syrian interests, Damascus had joined the peace process only in response to massive U.S. pressure exerted by James Baker, President George Bush's secretary of state. In his memoirs, Baker describes in detail the wearisome negotiations he conducted with Asad, thereby providing some insight (even if from a U.S. angle) into the conduct of such vital talks, the considerations at work in Damascus, and the way decisions are finally made.

Baker's memoirs attest to the great weight Asad attached to public opinion in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world. According to Baker, Asad repeatedly stressed the need for decisions to be understood properly and supported fully by the public at large. Asad once remarked, "If you were in my place . . . you wouldn't be more flexible than I am now." To underscore his demand for U.S. backing for the return of the Golan Heights, Asad said: "The land is important. . . . It connotes dignity and honor. A man is not chosen to go to paradise unless he can do so in a dignified way. We don't want anyone to say we have given up what we have been talking about for twenty years."[3]

At another point, Asad was more peremptory. Referring to a U.S. proposal regarding the United Nations (UN) role in the future peace conference, he reportedly told Baker: "We will lose Arab domestic public opinion. . . . They will know what is going on. This would not only be adventurism, it would be a form of suicide. It is one thing to adopt a suicidal policy if it brings benefits to the people, but it is truly foolhardy if there is no positive result."[4]

Baker tended both to discount the importance to Asad of domestic political constraints and to think of their mention as a mere negotiating tactic. Underlying his judgment was the sense that Asad exercised sole power to the extent of being able to set policies entirely by his own decision. A passage in his memoirs, relating how Baker pressed Asad to waive UN sponsorship of the peace negotiations, illustrates Baker's thinking. Baker recalls that Asad replied: "I can't give you an answer without consulting with the institutions of the party and the Progressive National Front [for which, see below]. . . . We will do what we can." Baker further recalls: "It was, I knew, the ultimate brush-off; there was no one in the Syrian Arab Republic with whom Asad needed to consult, except himself. 'Okay let's leave it,' I abruptly concluded, slamming my portfolio shut to make sure Asad absorbed my irritation."[5]

Some twenty years earlier, the then–secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, had conducted a long and exhausting series of negotiations with Asad in the aftermath of the 1973 War, with the aim of arriving at a disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights. Like many other U.S. diplomats and officials, he found Asad to be a skillful and sophisticated negotiator. His memoirs reveal that he, too, noted Asad's concern—and that of his close associates—with ensuring the support of Arab public opinion at every turn. He quotes Asad as saying:

> The Syrian difficulty is that people here who have been nurtured for twenty-six years on hatred [of Israel], can't be swayed overnight by our changing our courses. We would never take one step except in the interests of our own people. We are all human—we all have our impulsive reaction to things. But in

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[2] See Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1991); Daniel Pipes, *Damascus Courts the West: Syrian Politics, 1989–1991* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1991); Daniel Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 1996).

[3] James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 456.

[4] Ibid., p. 448.

[5] Ibid., p. 457.

leadership, we have to restrain ourselves and analyze and take steps in our own interest. A just peace is in the interest of our people.

To which Kissinger replied: "And of Israel and of all people in this area."[6]

At another point, Kissinger describes Hikmat Shihabi, the Syrian chief of staff and a close collaborator of Asad: "He said that he was an old friend of Asad's. He could assure me that Asad and his closest associates wanted an agreement but it had to be one they could defend domestically against bitter radical opposition."[7]

Unlike Baker, Kissinger tended to acknowledge that concern for the public mood was a genuine consideration in shaping Syrian decisions. He recognized an authentic need on the part of Asad to satisfy Syrian public opinion, secure its support, and convince it of the correctness of his chosen path. He sensed in Asad a genuine commitment to his overall world view and believed that his concern for broad public support stemmed from his personal character and the character of the regime he headed. In his memoirs, Kissinger points to Asad's habit of convening very lengthy meetings with his principal associates; he does not regard that practice as a means to exhaust his interlocutor, but as a genuine concern for domestic reactions. In his own words:

> By then, Asad and I were acting as if in rehearsal for a play. Time-consuming, nerve-wracking, and bizarre as the procedure was, it had the great advantage from Asad's point of view that he never had to argue for a concession himself, at least in the first instance. That onus was on me. His colleagues were part of the negotiations; they had a chance to object; they almost never did so. Whatever argument persuaded Asad would also have persuaded his colleagues. It was effective domestic politics at the expense of many sleepless nights for me.[8]

Kissinger describes the crucial moments of the negotiations as follows:

> There being no further point in abstract explorations, I put forward the "United States proposal." Asad stopped me at this point and called in his Defense Minister and his Chief of Staff. Clearly, he did not wish to take sole responsibility for major steps. And he wanted to be sure that his colleagues (and potential rivals) could not claim later that he had been taken in. To this end, it was not enough for him to repeat what I had said; they had to be persuaded by the same arguments. It proved, at any rate, that matters were reaching a point of decision.[9]

This was the background against which Kissinger arrived at the following sweeping judgment—so utterly contradictory to Baker's:

> From the beginning, it was clear that he [Asad] did not possess the personal authority exercised by Sadat. I do not recall that Sadat ever mentioned domestic obstacles to his policies. Even if they existed, he absorbed them in his own position, he acted in his own name, which is another way of saying that he assumed the responsibility for Egypt. (And in the end paid for this bravura with his life.) Asad at no point claimed this authority.[10]

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[6] Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), p. 1087.
[7] Ibid., p. 1068.
[8] Ibid., p. 781.
[9] Ibid., p. 1083.
[10] Ibid., pp. 780–781.

The contradiction in Kissinger's and Baker's assessments might be reconciled by recalling that the former met Asad at barely three years after the Syrian president's rise to power. Asad, then still at the beginning of his presidential career, was inexperienced and somewhat insecure in the conduct of foreign policy. His main preoccupation was still the full consolidation of his own position in Syria.

By the time Asad met Baker, however, the Syrian president had come a long way. He had accumulated a great deal of personal and political experience; had created a position of power for himself unprecedented in modern Syria; and had made his country stable and strong enough in regional, inter-Arab, and international affairs to be considered a regional power. To bring this out, it is enough to note the titles of two books by Patrick Seale, a British journalist and confidant of Asad's whose writings provide a kind of running commentary on Asad's career: A book by Seale about pre-Asad Syria, first published in 1965, is called *The Struggle for Syria*, and a biography of Asad, published in 1988, is entitled *Asad of Syria—The Struggle for the Middle East*.[11]

But for all Asad's achievements in the intervening years, Kissinger's view is worth serious consideration even today; it points to an important, even vital, side of Asad's political personality that later commentators and researchers tend to ignore. It should be stressed that Kissinger's observations are not at all tantamount to saying that Asad is a weak leader. On the contrary, one might well regard Asad's quest for public support and the degree to which he has gained it as a source of strength marking him off from other Arab leaders. It is not, as Clinton seems to have thought, a matter of a higher IQ; rather, it is a heightened and informed awareness of the political limitations and weaknesses of his own power, of his regime, and of Syria as a state. True, this awareness has rendered Asad cautious, even hesitant, but it has also provided the basis on which his accomplishments rest. This is true first and foremost of the achievement of domestic political stability—and thus of Asad's own political survival.

## THREE ORBITS: 'ALAWI, SYRIAN, ARAB

Asad's assumption of power, on November 16, 1970, was a watershed in Syrian history. Until then, modern Syria had been described—and rightly so—in terms of internal strife, of an often frantic search for a proper political road to travel, and of casting about for a sense of national identity. *The Struggle for Syria*, as Seale called it, ended with Asad's takeover.[12] His political flair, aided by changes then taking place inside and outside Syria, enabled him to set up a strong and centralized state.

But some reservations are in order. Although not detracting from Asad's achievements, the following points allow a more realistic view of his regime and a better understanding of the context in which it operates.

The first point that must be made is that, despite the continuity of the regime, which gives it all the perceived appearances of stability, Asad's rule has been a long fight for survival against domestic and foreign challenges. Often enough, these challenges—such as the Islamic rising (1976–82) and the struggle for power between Asad and his brother Rif'at (1983–84)—threatened the regime's equilibrium or even its very existence. True, Asad emerged victorious in these and other cases, but uncertainties persist, most conspicuously with regard to the regime's future after Asad. The issue of succession has become more

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[11] Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965; reprinted in 1987), *Asad of Syria—The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[12] See Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*.

prominent during the last few years and its lack of solution has a dislocating effect in which the uncertainties of the future seem to be projecting themselves backward into the present.[13]

A second point is that Asad alone cannot claim responsibility for the measure of stability now prevalent in the country. He was greatly aided by circumstances: the many years of ruthless power struggles—over ideological, political, communal, social and economic issues—that preceded his takeover had exhausted those elements involved. The principal rivals had neutralized or liquidated each other, leaving the stage almost empty for a relatively new actor to play the protagonist. By the time Asad came to power, the old Sunni urban elite that had run the country for centuries had virtually lost its power. Ideological parties, like the Syrian National Party (PPS) or the Communists, had been suppressed in the 1950s and 1960s. The founding fathers of the Ba'th party (notably Michel 'Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Baytar) had been removed from the scene. The corps of senior Sunni army officers had dissipated their strength in prolonged power struggles for the control of the armed forces and thus of the government. More than that: The leaders of the neo-Ba'th group that had seized power in February 1966—many of them from the Druze or Isma'ili minorities—had been neutralized. Only the Ba'th radicals—Salah Jadid and his political allies—still constituted an obstacle barring Asad's way to the top. But Jadid cut away the ground from under his own feet, in Syria as well as in the Arab world, by his intransigent—not to say adventurist—approach to governance. All Asad—himself a member of Jadid's ruling group—had to do was to administer the last push to bring him down. The moment was ripe for a new leader—a man who would confer on his regime the prestige of firm, centralized, and stable rule and the appearance of no longer facing any substantial domestic challenge.[14] Asad proved himself an extremely skillful and sophisticated leader who turned every circumstance to his own best advantage.

Asad's regime is often described as brutally dictatorial, representing only the interests of a small sector of the population—the 'Alawi community to which he himself belongs. To safeguard its rule—such accounts add—the regime relies on those units in the armed forces officered and staffed largely by 'Alawis.[15] Yet, realities are more complex than that. The regime moves in and is sustained by three orbits: the 'Alawi, the Syrian, and the Arab (to borrow from Nasser's well-known dictum of Egypt moving in the Arab, Islamic, and African orbits).

Asad is an 'Alawi by virtue of his background and the formative influences on his mind, a Syrian by his bearing and appearance, and an Arab from inner conviction. 'Alawis provide the inner core of the regime; Syrians from other communities envelope and surround it; and Arab sentiment and identity give it its soul, purpose, and legitimacy.

To take the 'Alawi orbit first: True, Asad's regime is basically a form of one-man rule, with himself at the center. But it has a familial, even tribal, side to it. This, for instance, explains the president's attempt to groom his son Bashar to succeed him. It is seen clearly in the filling of numerous influential positions with Asad's kinfolk or by people from his tribe, the Kalbiyya. The communal character of the regime is evident in the central role 'Alawis play in it—a role that is out of all proportion to their percentage strength in the population. 'Alawi officeholders provide the ties bonding the various components of the regime.

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[13] See Eyal Zisser, "Toward the Post-Asad Era in Syria," *Japanese Institute of Middle Eastern Economies—JIME Review*, no. 28 (Spring 1995), pp. 5–16.

[14] See Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996).

[15] See Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991); Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process*.

In a broader context, Asad's rise to power and the structure of his regime illustrate the emergence of the 'Alawi community from its former status as a minority held in rather low regard and its assumption of a dominant role in the state. Only half a century earlier, the 'Alawi community was marginal to Syria as a whole, in geographical, political, social, and economic terms. The first clearly visible sign of its quiet march forward and upward came at the time of the neo-Ba'th takeover of February 1966. The coup propelled the 'Alawi army officers into dominant power positions, but they still preferred to act behind the scenes. Only Asad's own so-called "corrective revolution" of 1970, which gained him the presidency, finally placed the 'Alawis in the limelight. Since then, it would be true to say that Asad has bonded the 'Alawis around him and they, in turn, provide the bonding material for the regime.[16]

This being so, it is understandable why, though Asad's regime was close to the Soviet Union in political terms, his own role models were the personal, family-oriented regimes of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania and of Kim Il Sung in North Korea. No wonder, then, that Ceausescu's downfall in December 1989 was a great personal shock to Asad—and a source of encouragement to his opponents: Graffiti reading "Every Ceausescu's day will come" appeared in Damascus at the time.[17] Kim Il Sung's death also came as a shock to Asad. In a most unusual gesture, he went himself to the North Korean embassy in Damascus to express his condolences, proclaimed several days of national mourning in Syria, and sent a personal message to the North Korean leaders stressing the close ties between the two states and adding that North Korea had been a source of inspiration for himself and his regime.[18]

But 'Alawi communal, tribal, and familial aspects do not reveal the full story of Asad's rise to power. Surrounding the 'Alawi core is a body of other figures who together reflect the broader *Syrian* realities. This non-'Alawi "envelope" is stronger than is often supposed. It fully reflects the political and social upheavals that came in the wake of the original Ba'th party takeover of 1963. It comprises the same forces that, in 1963, caused the collapse of the old ruling elite—those of the Sunni urban notables. True, the 'Alawis occupy a central, even dominant, place in it, but one should point to the following other components:

• *Sunnis from the rural areas.* Under the rule of the urban notables, this group was denied any kind of social mobility and prevented from entering politics. It remained at the bottom of the social scale, much like most of the minority communities. Only in the wake of the 1963 Ba'th takeover were its members able to launch themselves on the road forward. The second Ba'th coup, of 1966, gave them another boost, even though their progress was now conditional on their acceptance of 'Alawi predominance. Presently, they began occupying most of the influential positions in the new establishment—at least those openly perceived as such. Behind the scenes, much power remained reserved for 'Alawis. Among the representatives of these Sunnis are 'Abd al-Halim al-Khaddam, vice president for foreign affairs; Mahmud al-Zu'bi, prime minister; Faruq al-Shara, foreign minister; and Mustafa Talas, minister of defense. Two other Sunni leaders are survivors from the urban class: Zuhayr al-Masharqa, the vice president for domestic affairs, and Hikmat Shihabi, the chief of staff.

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[16] See Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*; Eyal Zisser, "The 'Alawis, Lords of Syria: From Ethnic Minority to Ruling Sect," in Gabriel Ben-Dor and Ofra Bengio, eds., *Minorities in the Middle East* (forthcoming).

[17] Dan Avidan, "Hadashot miSurya" (News from Syria), *Davar,* March 8, 1990, p. 9; see also Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey* 14 (1990), p. 653.

[18] "Al-Qa'id al-Asad Yursilu Barqiyat Ta'ziyya liSha'b Shimal Kuriya" (President Asad sends his condolences to the people of North Korea), *al-Ba'th,* July 14, 1994, p. 11.

• *Non-'Alawi minorities in Syria: Christians, Druze, and Isma'ilis.* These regard 'Alawi dominance as a guarantee for their own status and security which, they fear, would not be safeguarded under a regime dominated by the Sunni majority.

• *The Sunni economic elite, especially that of Damascus.* Since the early 1990s, this group has gradually become integrated into the establishment. These are the individuals who knew how to turn the recent policies of economic and—to some extent—political "openness" to their advantage. So far, their access to, let alone their influence on, the central core of decision makers has been limited indeed; their acceptance as power partners, if it happens at all, will be very slow.[19]

It is this coalition of forces whose representatives now hold the political and economic key positions and form the regime's social upper class. Their rise became possible by means of two conduits not open to them before 1963: the army and the Ba'th party apparatus. The army had, from its inception, attracted men from among the minorities and the socially underprivileged. This was particularly true of 'Alawis and rural Sunnis. Historical circumstances enabled members of these groups to rise to senior positions in the army and then to make their military career a springboard for joining the higher echelons of the regime. The Ba'th party appealed to similarly marginal groups. Initially, the party was a radical grouping that placed itself far from the center of the political gamut. Its social and economic platform, as well as its secular doctrine, suited membership candidates from the minorities and the lower, especially the rural, social orders. After the first Ba'th takeover, its cadres were able to make their way into the institutions of state. Following the wave of nationalizations carried out by the Ba'th, others were able to occupy intermediate or senior economic positions as well.

Asad's regime, more so than those of his predecessors, thus truly reflects the fabric of Syria as it was created in 1963 (and as it has remained, almost unaltered, since then). This claim is pivotal to the main argument of this paper, because it implies that the regime is more representative of the population as a whole, its constituent parts, and their balance of strength than is commonly assumed. This is one key to the support Asad enjoys.

Because of broad popular support, Asad's regime was able to weather the Islamic rising, a rebellion that has been described as a real threat to the very existence of the Ba'th regime. For that reason, Syria's rulers have brutally and relentlessly supressed it. Yet, support for the Islamic rebels was limited to a number of Sunni towns in northern Syria. The rural Sunni population, the minorities, and even the urban Sunnis of Damascus remained supportive of the regime, or at least firmly refrained from acting against it. In doing so, they contributed a great deal to the government's success in putting down the rising.[20]

Nevertheless, the cohesion of the coalition underpinning the regime rests on two conditions. One is Asad's ability to make the various components of the coalition experience a sense of belonging and partnership in running the state and to satisfy, at least in part, their social and economic needs. The available data attest to a remarkably successful record in both respects.[21] Yet, further social developments already under way, such as rapid urbanization and the growth of urban lower classes, will give rise to new expectations and require different means to satisfy them.

The other condition is sustaining a clear balance of power between the participants in the coalition; in other words, maintaining a clearly marked preponderance of 'Alawis in the army and the security

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[19] See Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995); Eberhard Kienle, ed., *Contemporary Syria, Liberalization Between Cold War and Cold Peace* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994).

[20] See Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "The Islamic Movement in Syria: Sectarian Conflict and Urban Rebellion in an Authoritarian–Populist Regime," in Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, ed., *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World* (New York: Praeger, 1982), pp. 138–169.

[21] Interview by the author with a Syrian academic in Washington, D.C., June 23, 1996.

services. Only by doing so can the regime ensure the cooperation of the components of the coalition among each other and of each of them with the 'Alawis.

The real danger to the future of the regime is thus not from factions outside the regime—that is, from opposition groups in Syria or, mostly, abroad; these are weak and marginal. Rather, the potential source of danger lies within the coalition itself: A breakdown of the cohesion of its parts or even of the 'Alawi element within it, for instance over the issue of the succession, could well bring down the regime.

The Arab orbit comes to the fore in the ideological aspect of the Ba'th regime—an aspect of undeniable strength, even predominance, in it. The party is genuinely committed to an Arab world view and its doctrine embodies that commitment. "Arabism" is a source of inspiration and of legitimacy at home and abroad. True, a number of researchers hold that Asad is a cynical leader lacking principles and solely concerned with buttressing his power in Syria and, if possible, beyond Syria's borders as well (by means of the notion of Greater Syria).[22] But the history of Syria under the Ba'th, and Asad's personal political record, make it apparent that pan-Arabism rather than pan-Syrianism lies at the core of his and his party's ideological commitment. Ba'thism revolves around the idea of comprehensive Arab unity. As a matter of course, Syria is to play a leading role in its realization. As a preliminary step—a precondition for achieving the broader aim—Damascus is called upon to establish Syrian hegemony over the adjacent Arab areas (the "near abroad," as it would be called in another context): Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Palestine. (Seale's above-mentioned title *Asad of Syria—The Struggle for the Middle East* seems to say precisely that.)

Such ideological commitments appear to be altogether authentic; they reflect needs felt broadly among all ranks of the regime as well as personal and political needs of Asad. It should be stressed once again that cadres running the regime (most particularly the 'Alawis) comprise men who were new to power when they achieved it and, initially, lacked experience, political maturity, and self-confidence. Commitment to the Ba'th doctrine of pan-Arabism became their trademark as well as the surest means of winning over the minds of other sectors of the population, particularly of the urban Sunnis (who had hitherto been the chief guardians of that idea). Ideological commitment became the glue holding the various parts of the coalition together. The tenets of "Arabism" were a platform, indeed more than that: a program for action, capable of rallying a broad consensus around it.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SYRIAN REGIME

Syria is run by a dual power system. To the outside, it presents the picture of a normal government: a well-ordered series of institutions of state (mostly created by Asad's regime itself), each having its place in a hierarchy laid down by the constitution (or sometimes by the statutes of the Ba'th party). These institutions include the presidency, the People's Assembly (parliament), and the cabinet. The party has its own institutions and its own hierarchy. In addition, a number of so called "popular organizations" represent distinct sectors of the population: Among these are trade unions, professional associations, and the farmers and the students associations.

This formal system of government reflects the numerical strength of the components of the coalition described above. In the eyes of the ruling group, the system's main task is to create a sense of legitimacy

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[22] See Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria—The History of an Ambition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process.*

and give an appearance of legality to the measures taken by the regime. In addition, it provides ample scope for rewarding supporters by appointing them to government posts. This creates a measure of social and economic mobility and in some cases access to the centers of political power.

Contrasting with this structure, a hidden side of the regime exists: the informal power exercised mainly by the heads of the security services and by senior army officers—in short, the men on whom the regime depends for its stability and its future. These officers have their place—some overtly, most covertly—in the ruling hierarchy. Their positions of power may not be recognized by the constitution, but they are indicative of the political weight and the intrinsic (rather than numerical) strength of the elements of the coalition.

To illustrate: Approximately 60 percent of the cabinet ministers, the members of the People's Assembly, and the deputies to the Party Congress are Sunnis—much like the percentage of Sunnis in the overall population. The informal ruling cadres, by contrast, attest to the real power and predominance of the 'Alawis: Close to 90 percent of the officers commanding the major military formations are 'Alawis, and so are most of the top echelons in the various security services.[23]

The formal government apparatus is arranged along two parallel lines: the administration and the party. The constitution places the party and its institutions above the state administration, Clause VIII laying down that "the Ba'th Party leads society and the state and stands at the head of the National Progressive Front, which acts to unite the forces of the masses and to mobilize them in the service of goals of the Arab nation."[24] (The National Progressive Front is a formal coalition of the Ba'th with other parties permitted to operate. Together, they make up a large majority in the People's Assembly.)

Party branches and cells are spread throughout Syria, and through them the party line is brought to everyone's notice. Every four years, the branches elect deputies to represent them at the Party Congress. The Congress in turn elects the top party institutions: the ninety-person central committee (*al-Lajna al-Markaziyya*) and the twenty-one-person Regional Command (*al-Qiyada al-Qutriyya*). The latter is the party's highest organ and therefore also the country's most senior body. Its role is evident from the constitutional provision laying down that a presidential candidate is to be approved first by the Regional Command, and only following such an approval is the People's Assembly free to approve his candidacy and to submit it to a public referendum.[25] The top party position is that of secretary-general, currently held by Asad himself.

It should be added that, in theory, the Syrian Ba'th party is only part of a wider body, the all-Arab Ba'th. The individual parties in the various Arab countries, including the Syrian party, are supposedly subordinate to the so-called National Command (*al-Qiyada al-Qawmiyya*). In at least one case, in Iraq in 1963, the National Command actually demonstrated its superiority. Led by two of the party's founding fathers, Michel 'Aflaq and Salah ad-Din Baytar, it intervened in Baghdad and laid down for the Iraqi Regional Command the steps it should take in the domestic crisis that had erupted there. It then turned out

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[23] Dar al-I'tisam, *Hama, Ma'sat al-'Asr alti Faqat Majazir Sabra waShatila* (The Tragedy of Hama—Far Beyond the Massacre in Sabra and Shatila) (Cairo: Dar al-I'tisam, undated), p. 150; see also Moshe Maoz, *Asad Hasfinks shel Damesek* (The Sphinx of Damascus) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1988), pp. 63–66.

[24] See "al-Nuss al-Kamil lil-Dustur al-Da'im" (The full text of the Syrian constitution), *al-Thawra* (Damascus), February 1, 1973, pp. 3, 7.

[25] Ibid.; see also Hani Khalil, *Hafiz al-Asad Wadawlat al-Dimuqratiyya al-Sha'biyya* (Hafiz al-Asad and the Popular Democratic State) (Damascus: Dar Talas lil-Nashr, 1987).

that the line prescribed from Damascus in the name of the National Command was disastrous and caused the Iraqi party to lose power for some five years.[26]

Today, the distinction between the "regional" (countrywide) and the "national" (all-Arab) level has become meaningless. From among the Ba'th parties in various Arab countries, only two have remained important—the Syrian and the Iraqi—but each denies the legitimacy of the other in terms of party politics and party ideology, and they are not on speaking terms. Their rift spilled over into the smaller Ba'th parties elsewhere. In Lebanon, for instance, there used to be a pro-Syrian and, separately, a pro-Iraqi Ba'th. The latter was eliminated after the entry of Syrian troops into Lebanon. Whatever remains of the Jordanian and the Palestinian Ba'th parties is now dominated from Syria, just like the surviving Lebanese party. Syria thus also dominates the "national" party institutions, almost defunct though they may be. They are, however, still important enough—both as a lesson from the past and a possible hope for the future—for Asad to have placed himself at the top of the "national" hierarchy, together with his post as "regional" secretary-general of the Syrian party.

The formal government apparatus, though theoretically working in parallel with the party, is actually controlled by it. Control is maintained by filling almost all key posts with party members. The 250 members of the People's Assembly are elected by constituency elections once every four years. The parties making up the National Progressive Front—led, as has been seen, by the Ba'th—fill about 60 percent of the seats. The rest are independents. The constitution gives the Assembly the prerogative of naming a presidential candidate, but his name must first be approved and recommended to it by the Regional Command. The Assembly further enacts laws, approves the budget, pronounces on development plans, and ratifies international agreements. It is entitled to review government policies and to criticize them, as it deems necessary. As already mentioned, the regime has been endeavoring over the last few years to broaden the social composition of the Assembly by the inclusion of the Sunni business elite, especially that of Damascus—a group with whom it is trying to mend fences.[27]

The executive power includes the president and the cabinet. The constitution describes the latter as the highest executive and administrative authority in the country. The president appoints the prime minister and the other members of the cabinet and they answer to him, but they are obliged to report to the Assembly on their activities. As has been seen, the various communities are represented in the cabinet roughly according to their percentage strength in the population. It is worth stressing this point: In the 1960s, 'Alawis and people from the peripheral areas of Syria (also for the most part members of minorities) were overrepresented. Only after Asad's advent to power was the disproportion corrected.

Other parties allowed to operate in Syria include several varieties of communists and of Nasserists. They are no more than the mere remnants of earlier political groupings that have their roots in the politics of the 1950s and the 1960s. All are joined together in the National Progressive Front established in 1972 and headed by Asad. Alongside them, so-called popular organizations act as quasi-parties. They include professional unions, workers' organizations, the farmers' association, women's organizations, and others.

As against all these bodies, the informal apparatus centers mainly on the army and the security forces. Their influence cannot be overstated; it derives most of all from the basic fact that they hold the ruling coalition together. Among its prominent members are 'Ali Duba, head of the military security branch

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[26] See Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria Under the Ba'th 1963–1966: The Army–Party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1972), pp. 80–84; Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th v. Ba'th: The Conflict Between Syria and Iraq 1968–1989* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), pp. 30–35.

[27] See Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad;* Kienle, ed., *Contemporary Syria;* Eyal Zisser, "Surya—Liqrat Seder Hadash miBayit" (Syria—Toward a New Order?), *Hamizrach Hahadsh* 28 (1996), pp. 116–134.

(*Shu'bat al-Mukhabarat al-'Askariyya,* the army's internal security service); Ibrahim Huwayji, head of air force security directorate (*Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya*); Bashir Najjar, head of the general security directorate (*Idarat al-Amn al-'Amm*); and 'Adnan Badr Hasan, head of the political security directorate (*Idarat al-Amn al-Siyasi*). To their ranks must be added a number of senior officers: corps commanders and the generals commanding the armored divisions deployed near Damascus. Among them are Shafiq Fayyad, commander of the third corps; Ibrahim Safi, commander of the second corps; 'Ali Hasan, commander of the Republican Guard unit; 'Ali Habib, commander of the "Special Forces" (commando units); and a few others. Together, they are responsible for the state's stability and, in large measure, are holding the key to its future.[28]

Yet in the day-to-day life of society and in the functioning of the economy, the influence of this group of largely 'Alawi officers is felt much less than foreigners often assume. With the measure of stability already achieved, the regime's dependence on them is receding. Besides, they themselves view their environment almost entirely from the military and security angle and hold no strong opinions on social or economic issues.

It falls to the Ba'th party to try to mitigate the inherent contradiction between the formal and the informal government elites. It does so mainly by providing the ideological "envelope" for both. The party lays down the "correct" political, social, and economic lines binding on all who have a share in power— formal or informal. Moreover, the party furnishes the interface where both elites meet and interact, the arena where they both gather, and the bodies in which both are represented. The party has its cells in the armed forces and the security services and, just like other branches, these cells elect their representatives to the higher party bodies. The central committee, for instance, has ninety members, including party functionaries of various types and ranks and individuals drawn from the higher ranks of the administrative bureaucracy, the armed forces, and the security services; nine members are senior 'Alawi officers and several are senior Sunni commanders.[29] Such a composition is meant to give palpable expression to the superiority of the party over all other power elites, certainly over the army officers. (The regime never fails to speak of Syria's "ideological army,"—a term meant to convey that the armed forces act on behalf of the party and are the executers of its line.) It is in these party bodies that a dialogue between the formal and the informal power-holders can be conducted and frictions can be resolved.

Yet, that the party apparatus has not always been able to assert its superiority over the military or to act as an effective moderator between the civilian elite and the senior officers. In 1969–70 for instance, both the party cadres and the institutions of the state sided, almost in their entirety, with Salah Jadid in his confrontation with Asad, who was then minister of defense and commander of the air force and was on his way to the top with the backing of the armed forces and the security services. Their support enabled him to complete his take-over in November 1970. Jadid's supporters were promptly purged from party bodies and the state service and replaced by men loyal to Asad.[30]

A similar example is provided by the power struggle, in 1983 and 1984, between Asad and his brother Rif'at (which shall be discussed below). For all intents and purposes, it was carried out within the ranks of the senior officers, who totally ignored the institutions of the party and the state. At the time, Asad was

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[28] See Alain Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power: Disintegration by Politics," *Maghreb–Machrek,* (January–March 1995), pp. 93–119, as translated in the Daily Report of the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), October 3, 1995; Eyal Zisser, "The Succession Struggle in Damascus," *Middle East Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (September 1995), pp. 57–64.

[29] For the composition of the party institutions see Radio Damascus, January 28, 1985; Itamar Rabinovich, "Syria," *Middle East Contemporary Survey* 9, (1984–85), pp. 645–646.

[30] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria,* pp. 62–74.

in bad health and the question arose of how to run affairs until his recovery. Asad's attempt to turn to the party and state bodies—by appointing a six-man interim body drawn from their ranks to exercise the president's functions temporarily—was countered by organized resistance on the part of the senior 'Alawi officers. They rallied around Rif'at Asad in an attempt to foil a move that they interpreted as intended to diminish their status or even to end 'Alawi dominance altogether. As soon as Asad recovered, he confronted his brother and most of the officers who had backed Rif'at abandoned him and reaffirmed their loyalty to the president. But what is of concern here is not so much the eventual outcome but the fact that the confrontation was conducted within the higher ranks of the armed forces and security services, without reference to the party hierarchy or the "formal" state elite. It was only after the struggle had been decided in favor of Asad, and after Rif'at had in effect been removed from all positions of influence, that the outcome was formalized: a party congress, convened in January 1985, elected new higher party bodies in which Rif'at's supporters were no longer included.[31]

Against the background of the structure previously described, Asad's personal role stands out all the more strongly: He heads the groups of both the formal and the informal power-holders and acts as the real strongman of both. As president, he heads the formal state apparatus; as secretary-general of both the Regional and National Commands, he leads the party hierarchy. Under the constitution, the president is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces, giving him full control over the informal elite of the officers. But it is not the constitution that gives him his status: It is his authority as a strong, skillful, and effectual leader.

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[31] See Rabinovich, "Syria," pp. 645–646; Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 421–440.

# III

## Syria's Elite:
## The Inner Circle of Decision Makers

The above description has pointed to the pivotal position that President Hafiz al-Asad occupies by virtue of his personality and of the offices he holds. The image of strong leadership he has built up in Syria and elsewhere has become a source of strength in itself. Despite the personal and communal ('Alawi) character of the regime and despite the resentment it has elicited in some sectors of the population (for instance, because of the brutal suppression of the Islamic uprising), Asad is as widely admired as he is feared. His prestige derives from his record at home, from his stance on the conflict with Israel, and from his attitudes on pan-Arab issues.[1] He may not impress the public by any particular readiness to take risks, but his views conform closely to those of many Syrians and other Arabs. At most times and for the most part, his views gain him the support of the man in the street. Positions of power and broad public support combine to make Asad an "indispensable" leader. This is a great asset to the regime and its stability—but at the same time the regime's dependence on a single individual is a grave liability.

Then again, Asad is not alone at the top and does not act in a vacuum. An elite group surrounds him and assists in maintaining the regime. It includes personalities from both the formal and the informal ruling apparatus. Often enough, the weight each carries in the inner circle does not stem from the position he is holding but from his personal impact and status. With some, it reflects the importance of the bodies they head. This, for instance, is true of some of the divisional commanders, or of certain heads of security agencies. The power and personality of these members of the inner circle may lead them to enjoy greater status than some cabinet ministers—who have no real access to or influence over Asad.

The key to joining the inner circle, and the yardstick of a person's importance once he is included in it, is closeness to Asad. Four kinds of such ties can be distinguished:

    1)  Family ties. This is demonstrated by the status of Asad's sons and brothers.

    2)  Tribal ties (through the Kalbiyya) or communal ties (membership in the 'Alawi community).

    3)  Personal friendship. Most men in this category have come a long way with Asad. They have supported him (some since the 1950s or 1960s) through the vicissitudes of his struggle for power. Their views were formed by the same influences as his and they share his present world view.

    4)  Ties created by working together. These apply to the president's assistants and advisers. Like his personal friends, most of them—whether belonging to the formal or the informal apparatus—have worked with him closely for many years and have frequent access to him.

All four categories have certain characteristics in common:

• All belong to one sector or another of the governing coalition described above and they thus represent the political, social, and economic order on which Asad's regime was built and on which it continues to rest.

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[1]  An interview by the author with a Syrian academic in Washington, D.C., June 23, 1996.

• Most are Asad's age (i.e., in their early or middle sixties). Most have held their present posts for many years (in some cases for more than two decades). Their seniority attests to Asad's taste for stability and for the preservation of the status quo. He seems to regard changes in the top echelons as unsettling. Mustafa Talas, for instance, has been defense minister since 1972 and Hikmat Shihabi chief of staff since 1974. Among the civilians, Faruq al-Shara has held office as foreign minister since 1985; Mahmud al-Zu'bi has held the premiership since 1987.

• Almost all members of the inner circle made their way up in either the army or the party. Most studied in military or other colleges in Eastern Europe, their studies inevitably leaving a mark on their outlook. This background explains the difficulty they now have in understanding and adjusting to the world of the 1990s with its single-power structure and the predominance of Western social and economic ideas.

But a word of caution is in order. The groups listed here are not necessarily coherent. Closeness to Asad does not always act as a bond between them; often enough, it creates tensions and rivalries. That may well be of benefit to Asad in ensuring their loyalty. But not only are there strains within each group—there are also friendships and personal political alliances that cut across the above lines.

Moreover, whatever their qualifications and the "appropriateness" of their background, they all depend on Asad, who can promote or demote them at will or draw them closer or keep them more removed. But arbitrariness is balanced by the fact that quite a number of them are autonomous representatives of various political or social forces—whether in Syria as a whole or (more often) within the 'Alawi community. Asad can indeed afford to remove someone from the inner circle, but he must then replace him with another individual equally representative of his predecessor's tribe or community, because the overall power balance needs to remain undisturbed. Furthermore, the president's dislike of change weighs strongly in favor of prolonged tenure.

The overall picture that emerges is thus one of symbiosis. The most senior office-holders do indeed depend on Asad, but he, for his part, needs them—individually or collectively. He needs them, politically speaking, because they reflect the regime's political, social, and economic order and represent the coalition that ensures him support. And he needs them personally because they are his friends, have traveled the road to success with him, share his views, and help him run the country.

## THE INNER CORE: ASAD'S FAMILY MEMBERS

The core of the inner circle consists of Asad's relatives. It is again subdivided into three layers or generations, each representing a certain stage in the process of the family's consolidating its hold over the centers of power. The first layer is formed by the president's brothers, Rif'at and Jamil, both of whom played a leading role until 1985. The next layer is formed by relatives of less close kinship, such as 'Adnan Makhluf or 'Adnan Asad. They were prominent in the inner circle until the early 1990s. The third group comprises Asad's sons: Basil, killed in a traffic accident in 1994, and Bashar (another son, Mahir, is less prominent). Each son started his way up in the early 1990s, with Asad's encouragement and active help.

### The Brothers (1970–85)

Until 1985, Rif'at was thought of as the number-two man in the regime. He was a member of the Regional Command of the party and was commander of an elite division, the so-called Defense

Companies (*Saraya al-Difa*). The division was deployed near Damascus with the mission of defending the regime against domestic enemies. According to Asad's confidant and biographer, Patrick Seale, it was Rif'at who urged Asad to enter into an all-out conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood. His view prevailed and the Brotherhood was suppressed with a great deal of violence.[2]

Jamil was long a member of the People's Assembly. But his main strength derived from his being the local strongman in the Syrian coastal strip—that is, the home area of the 'Alawis. In the early 1980s, Jamil formed the so-called 'Ali Murtada Forces, a paramilitary organization made up exclusively of 'Alawis. At its peak, it numbered tens of thousands of men. It was intended to serve as one of the main pillars of the regime's internal security, particularly during the struggle against the Islamists.[3]

Regardless of their primary security mission, both the Defense Companies and the Murtada Forces eventually turned into instruments for promoting the personal careers of their two commanders. Rif'at's "private" army eventually became one of the means he used to challenge Asad.

Asad was aware that the conduct of his two brothers often aroused the opposition of other figures at the top, but he needed their support to consolidate his own grip on power. Nevertheless, it would appear that he never trusted them completely. Moreover, when family loyalty and cohesion were put to their first real test, they failed. As a result, Asad quickly banished his brothers from the inner circle.

The crisis erupted on November 13, 1983, when Asad suffered a heart attack and was taken to the hospital in critical condition. Rif'at expected the president to turn over his powers to him temporarily, but Asad refused. Instead, he set up a collegiate body to exercise the presidential functions until his recovery. Its six members, all of them Asad's close political allies, were Sunnis. They were Mustafa Talas, 'Abd al-Halim al-Khaddam, Hikmat Shihabi, 'Abdallah al-Ahmar, Ra'uf al-Kasm, and Zuhayr al-Masharqa. Yet, Rif'at would have been ranked above them in terms of his standing in the inner circle.

Many senior 'Alawi army officers felt that this was the portent of a possible diminution of their special status. They quickly rallied around Rif'at and urged him to take action for the preservation of 'Alawi predominance. Rif'at probably did not need encouragement; he was already resolved to exploit the crisis to make himself heir-apparent. But once Asad was on the way to recovery and capable of taking action again, he showed his anger at Rif'at for having challenged his (Asad's) express provisions. The subsequent rift came close to turning into a military confrontation (between the Defense Companies and regular army units). Asad emerged victorious, among other things because, as soon as they realized that Asad was recovering, most 'Alawi army commanders went back to the president's side. Another factor was family mediation, conducted by Asad's mother, Na'isa, who was brought from the family's home village to Damascus. Rif'at was appointed vice president for national security affairs, but that remained an empty title. In actuality, he was removed from power, specifically from the command of the Defense Companies division, which was then placed under another officer, turned into a regular military formation, and made subordinate to the army chief of staff. Rif'at's supporters were removed from key positions in the army, the party, and the administration. Early in 1985, Rif'at was forced to leave Syria; his exile, in western Europe, was to last for seven years. At the same time, Asad took action against Jamil, blaming him for his failure to stand up promptly to Rif'at. The 'Ali Murtada Forces were disbanded and Jamil lost his position as a member of the top echelon.[4]

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[2] See Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria—The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 316–338; Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983), pp. 68–87.

[3] Mahmud Sadiq, *Hiwar Hawl Suriya* (Discussion over Syria) (London: Dar 'Ukaz, 1993), p. 77; Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 427; Alain Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power: Disintegration by Politics," *Maghreb–Machrek*, (January–March 1995).

[4] See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 427, and Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power."

Rif'at's return to Syria in 1992 became possible because of Na'isa's death; she had expressly laid down in her testament that Rif'at should be allowed back to Damascus. But at this writing (late 1997) he continues to be isolated and out of touch with the centers of power.[5] Nonetheless, his mere presence in the capital is significant. It implies that he remains a potential actor on the Syrian political scene and that he could still step in at the time of his elder brother's death. Rif'at is the only 'Alawi well-known abroad, and he has accumulated a great deal of political and military experience. He enjoys a measure of support both within and outside Syria.

## The Relatives (1985–90)

After exiling Rif'at, Asad promoted other members of the family to his inner circle. Until the fall from grace of the brothers, they had held no more than marginal positions. 'Adnan Makhluf, a nephew of Asad's wife, was appointed the officer commanding the Republican Guards Unit; this formation was now to take the place of the former Defense Companies as the elite unit for internal security. He was also made the tutor of Asad's son Basil. The president's nephew, 'Adnan al-Asad, commands the so-called Struggle Companies (*Saraya al-Sira*), another elite unit intended to carry out internal security missions.[6]

These men were hardly known outside the establishment. They lacked political experience altogether, and their military experience was limited. Moreover, they possessed no personal power base of their own. Their sole task was to make themselves useful to Asad and his family. They do not seem to have found their place in the inner circle, nor did they share in the decision-making process. When a dispute developed between Makhluf and Bashar (see below), Makhluf was promptly relieved of his command and, as a consolation prize, became adviser to the president. Clearly, a son ranked higher than a nephew.[7]

## The Sons (Since 1990)

Since the early 1990s, Asad's sons have been rising to prominence. Basil, born in March 1963, was the first to gain a place in the higher echelons. Basil's career shows that he was destined for great things right from the start. He underwent arduous military training and from age 30 onward Asad employed him in special missions. He became a brigade commander in the Republican Guard Unit but was also placed in charge of other important public affairs, such as the campaign against drug dealing and smuggling. He also became active in the Lebanese arena. He enjoyed considerable press coverage for his sports activities as captain of the Syrian national equestrian team, as well as for his campaign to promote the use of computers in Syria.[8]

After Basil's death in a car accident in January 1994, Bashar, who was born in September 1965, came to the fore. He trained as an ophthalmologist and at the time of his brother's accident was doing his internship in England. He quickly returned home and Asad began at once to groom him to fill the void Basil left behind. Bashar was given ample opportunity to accumulate the required experience. He became commander of the same brigade in the Republican Guard unit that Basil had headed, and he took over most of Basil's other assignments. Together with Bashar, Asad began promoting a younger generation of

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[5]  Douglas Jehl, "Syrians Struggle to Decipher Assad Clan's Dirty Laundry," *New York Times*, January 28, 1997, p. 1; idem., "New Riddles in Assad's Damascus," *International Herald Tribune*, January 29, 1997.

[6]  Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 429; Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power," pp. 9–13.

[7]  Interview by the author with Patrick Seale in London, September 25, 1995.

[8]  Eyal Zisser, "The Succession Struggle in Damascus," *Middle East Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (September 1995); "Farisuna al-Dhahabi" (Our golden knight), *al-Ba'th*, August 12, 1994, p. 12; "Basil al-Asad wal-Wiratha" (Basil al-Asad and the Succession), *al-Muharrir*, March 30, 1992, p. 1.

'Alawi officers who had drawn close to Bashar and could be expected to be loyal to him, if so required.[9] At present, Bashar looks well set to further consolidate his position, provided Asad remains in reasonable health for the next ten years or so. (This is important because the constitution lays down that the president must be at least 40 years of age when assuming office.)

Meanwhile, there can be no doubt that Bashar's presence close to Asad is a comfort to him after the loss of the son in whom he had placed such high hopes. Moreover, Bashar's rapid taking over of his brother's functions prevented a possible scramble for the latter's positions among rival members of the inner circle. From Asad's point of view, such a struggle would have been premature and detrimental.

For all that, one should not hurry to conclude that Bashar is assured of the presidency after Asad. For one thing, Bashar was not originally destined to fill that role and was therefore not given the rigorous preparatory training Basil received. For many years he was out of touch with the country's political and military problems. He lacks experience and above all, he has no intimate personal or professional knowledge of the powers-that-be in Syria. For another, the Syrian public seems to sense that Bashar does not possess that imposing charisma that had made Basil so popular in wide sectors of the public at large, including many non-'Alawis. Bashar's "soft landing" in the inner circles therefore seems a little artificial. It has elicited quite some skepticism and a measure of opposition. In the longer run, as the younger 'Alawi officers now on their way up reach higher positions, the picture may change.[10]

Basil was, and Bashar is, close to Asad; they were not only his sons but also his disciples. Today, Bashar's main function is probably still to listen closely and to fulfill his tasks as if following a course of study. It is unlikely that he has any influence on the decision-making process. But if Asad has a masterful knowledge of Syrian realities, Bashar has a better knowledge of the outside, particularly the western, world. So did Basil before him—witness his campaign for the wider use of computers (which Bashar has now taken over). If he can be credited for having any influence at the present stage, it is presumably in the direction of greater "openness" to the West, especially concerning modern technology. As Bashar's position becomes stronger, so will his influence in this regard.[11]

THE 'ALAWI 'BARONS'

The 'Alawi army and security officers belonging to Asad's tribe or family form a powerful group within the elite who rule Syria. Their control of the armed forces and the security services has made them the guarantors of Syrian domestic stability; for the last twenty-five years, they have underpinned Asad's rule. Their presence deters attempts—whether from within or from abroad—to topple the regime, and it gives cohesion to the entire governing coalition.

Nonetheless, the description of the 'Alawi "barons" as the sole decisive factor in the regime is an overstatement. Their status at the top, their relationship with the president, and the web of relations within their group are too complex to be described so summarily.

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[9] Eyal Zisser, "Syria," *Middle East Contemporary Survey* 19 (1995), pp. 565–566; Smadar Peri, "Asad II (Bashar)," *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, July 25, 1997, pp. 22–23.

[10] Interview by the author with a Syrian academic in Washington D.C., June 23, 1996.

[11] Bashar is known for his efforts to introduce the Internet in Syria. See "Bashar al-Asad Yuhaddi Kuliyyat al-Handasa al-Mi'mariyya biHalab Hasuba Mutatawira" (Bashar al-Asad gave an advanced computer to the engineering college in Aleppo), *al-Ba'th*, January 12, 1997, p. 1; see also Ibrahim Hamidi, "Bashar al-Asad wal-Internet" (Bashar al-Asad and the Internet), *al-Hayat*, October 12, 1997.

Some researchers have spoken of the Syrian regimes in terms of the Italian mafia and have compared Asad to a mafia "godfather."[12] The 'Alawis surrounding the president are then cast in the role of the musclemen who guard the godfather's preeminent position. Most particularly, they come into play during the power struggles following a godfather's death. Such comparisons are problematic but do contribute—even if only a little—to a general understanding of Syrian politics and decision making.

True, the "barons" have influence and can make it felt most of all at times when the stability of the regime is in question. By the same token, during spells of comparative stability, their importance decreases. That has been the case in the course of the last decade. They are not present when Asad receives official visitors from abroad and, according to Seale, do not participate in the more intimate meetings of the inner circle.[13] They do not have much to say with regard to the day-to-day decisions required during domestically quiet periods. In particular, they carry little weight in deciding social or economic, let alone foreign policy, issues. In fact, they may not be much interested in such questions: They are content to see the regime meet their particular economic expectations.

One way for the regime to do so (whether by active encouragement or tacit agreement) has been to turn their commands into politically and economically rewarding fiefdoms. One such method is to let them collect commissions from businesspeople who exploit their connections with some baron or other to promote their affairs in higher places not directly accessible to the business sector. In other cases, the barons become silent partners in certain business ventures. More direct methods are also employed: Soldiers under their command may be detailed to work on agricultural plots, engage in construction work, or perform other tasks—all for the profit of their commanding officers. Western sources assert that senior army or security officers enrich themselves by growing drugs in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley and smuggling them out. More often, they probably do not do so themselves but turn a blind eye to such activities by the local Lebanese—in return for a monetary consideration. Smuggling goods from Lebanon into Syria is another source of income for some of the barons. When Rif'at was still in command of the Defense Companies, his officers and men were allowed to hold a weekly market day in Damascus to sell goods smuggled in from Lebanon—mostly of the kind then legally unavailable in Syria. Rif'at and his senior officers received ample kick-backs.[14]

The barons comprise men of differing age groups and of men from varying tribal and familial backgrounds. Tensions therefore exist and sometimes turn into outright power struggles that may sometimes surface and become common knowledge. Only when their overall status as a privileged group is at issue do they close ranks. Like the broad coalition described earlier, the barons present the picture of a coalition, though a narrower one confined to the 'Alawi community. Asad has pieced together its components over the last three decades to ensure his control over the community—a key element in the overall stability of his regime.

It should be remembered that the 'Alawi community is traditionally disunited and there has never been a single political or religious figure holding all its segments together. It is split into tribes and even these are no more than loose frameworks in which a number of prominent families exercise control. The family has been, and in many ways continues to be, the only significant social unit within the community.

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[12] See Daniel Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy), pp. 9–31; Daniel Pipes, *Damascus Courts the West: Syrian Politics, 1989–1991* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute), pp. 3–12; Itamar Rabinovich, "The Godfather," *New Republic*, July 3, 1989, pp. 35–38.

[13] Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 179–183; also based on an interview by the author with Seale in London, September 25, 1995.

[14] See Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process*, pp. 9–31; also based on an interview by the author with a Syrian academic in Geneva, April 21, 1995.

When the French mandatory authorities tried to establish a representative meant to have authority over all of the 'Alawi community, they failed. Reports of the existence of a higher council of men of religion holding sway over the community as a whole have never been substantiated. They contradict the established fact that 'Alawi religious figures have for long played no more than a marginal role.[15]

This state of fragmentation was carried over into the period of independence, regardless of the increasing number of 'Alawis who began to make their way upward in the army officers corps or the party cadres. In 1963–66, for instance, the community was split into those siding with Asad and Jadid (then still political partners) and those loyal to the Muhammad 'Umran. The latter, an 'Alawi, had allied himself with the older generation of Ba'th party leaders, Michel 'Aflaq, Salah al-Din al-Baytar, and Gen. Amin al-Hafiz. The first was a Christian, the other two Sunnis. 'Umran was thus seen to be acting against the best interests of his own community. Next, from 1966 to 1970, after Asad and Jadid had fallen out, the 'Alawis' loyalty was divided evenly between the two.

Asad eventually succeeded in rallying the 'Alawi community around him, thus making possible his victory over Jadid. The communal coalition he was able to form then became the kernel of the broader, all-Syrian coalition that continues to uphold his regime. The narrower 'Alawi coalition took as its starting point ties of direct kinship as well as marriage links, then branched out into political alliances, making use, among other things, of existing patron–client relations. These steps gained Asad the loyalty of additional 'Alawi families who drew close to his own in return for enhanced political status or economic benefits. One of the first such steps was Asad's own marriage to Anisa, a woman from the important Makhluf family living in his own village of Qardaha and belonging to his own tribe, the Kalbiyya. The alliance with the Makhlufs gave him a stronger standing in his tribe and served as a springboard to broaden his influence over other parts of the community, such as the Haddadin tribe, which had close ties with the Makhlufs.[16]

Asad made clever use of the rule of *divide et impera* to keep a balance within the community, often utilizing existing tensions, but with the aim of neutralizing them. Today, all tribes are represented in the coalition, but those who represent them in the establishment are usually drawn from rival groups within each tribe; this tends to cancel out their influence. To illustrate: The most prominent representatives of the important tribe of Haddadin are Muhammad Khuli and Ibrahim Huwayji. The former became commander of the air force in 1994. The latter was for many years Khuli's client and, in 1987, when Khuli was forced out of his former position as head of the air force security directorate, he appointed Huwayji to succeed him.[17] In his new post, Huwayji quickly made himself independent of Khuli's patronage, and today the two clearly compete for influence and power—regardless of the fact that, as air force commander, Khuli is formally Huwayji's superior.[18]

Asad's 'Alawi entourage consists of two distinct age groups. The older one comprises senior officers in the armed forces and the security services, all of whom are Asad loyalists, and quite a few are personally close to him. The younger component, now gradually coming to the fore, consists of officers

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[15] See Matti Mossa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects,* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987), pp. 292–310; Martin Kramer, ed., *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1987), pp. 237–254.

[16] See Alain Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power."

[17] Khuli lost the post as a result of the Hindawi affair. Nizar al-Hindawi was an agent of the air force security directorate. His girlfriend was arrested at Heathrow Airport, on April 17, 1986, while boarding an El Al airplane, carrying an explosive charge. Hindawi was also arrested. After trying Hindawi, the British government pointed an accusing finger at Syria as responsible for the attempt to blow up an El Al plane, and London severed diplomatic ties with Damascus.

[18] An interview by the author with a Syrian academic in Geneva, April 21, 1995.

only recently appointed to their present positions. In most cases, they have replaced incumbents who were either promoted or pensioned off. Thus when Ibrahim Safi and Shafiq Fayyad were promoted from commanders of the first and third division, respectively, to corps commanders, members of the younger group replaced them. 'Ali Habib was similarly replaced at the head of the seventh division when he was appointed to command the "special forces." (His predecessor there, 'Ali Haydar, had been dismissed in 1994; see below.) What the younger have in common is, reportedly, their closeness to Bashar.[19] They may owe their progress to Asad's endeavors to reinforce Bashar's standing as heir-apparent by building up a group of fairly senior commanders and security officers who would pave the way for Bashar much like their predecessors did for Asad.

The group of 'Alawis surrounding the president may be divided as follows:[20]

• Asad's kinfolk, who were mentioned in preceding sections.

• Asad's fellow tribespeople. Prominent among them is the Khayr bek family, of whom Muhammad Nasif Khayr bek is deputy chief of the general security directorate; 'Issam Nasif Khayr bek is *chef de cabinet* of the defense minister, Mustafa Talas; and Fu'ad Nasif Khayr bek is a leader in the military security branch. Other fellow tribespeople are 'Ali Aslan, deputy chief of staff for training and operations, and Ghazi Kan'an, chief of the Syrian security services in Lebanon and thus the principal executer of Asad's policy there.

• Allies of Asad from among influential families of other tribes. One such figure is 'Ali Duba, from the tribe of Matawira. This is remarkable, because Jadid, Asad's great rival for so many years, came from the Matawira. But Duba preferred an "outsider" over his fellow tribesman and secured the loyalty of at least a part of the Matawira for Asad. From among the Khayyatin, one should note Ibrahim Safi, newly promoted from the command of the first division to that of the second corps and thus placed in charge of all Syrian troops in Lebanon. Another figure from the Khayyatin is 'Ali Haydar, commander of the "special forces" until 1994, when he was dismissed as a result of some friction with Asad. The position of two prominent men from the Haddadin tribe, Khuli and Huwayji, has already been discussed above.

Taken as a whole, Bashar's present supporters are still rather young, and the family or tribal background of most of them is not known, though one might assume that by and large they conform to the traditional pattern. This group includes 'Ali Hasan, who succeeded 'Adnan Makhluf as commander of the Republican Guard unit after the latter had an altercation with Bashar; and 'Ali Habib, who took over from 'Ali Haydar when the latter lost his position as commander of the "special forces."[21]

Marriage links help to give this group greater cohesion. Rif'at Asad excelled in this respect. He himself has four wives. One of his daughters married Mu'in Khayr bek, an officer under Rif'at in the Defense Companies. Another daughter married 'Ala Fayyad, the son of Shafiq Fayyad, commander of the third corps. Rif'at's son married Miya Haydar, daughter of Muhammad Haydar of the noted Haydar family. Such ties help Rif'at to preserve his status even after his quarrel with his brother and his

[19] See Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power," pp. 5–6; "I'fa Ra'is al-mukhabarat al-Suriyya" (The head of Syrian Intelligence was discharged from service), *al-Muharrir*, September 26, 1994, p. 1; Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey* 19, pp. 595–596.

[20] For more see, Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power," or Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 177–184; also based on an interview by the author with a Syrian academic in Washington, D.C., June 23, 1996.

[21] Zisser, "The Succession Struggle in Damascus," pp. 57–58; Smadar Peri, "Mefaqed Haqomando Potar" (The commander of the Special Forces was discharged from service), *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, November 4, 1994, p. 4

subsequent relegation. Asad's other brother, Jamil, has also used marriage links to consolidate his position. His daughter is married to the son of Ghazi Kan'an.[22]

Of course, the group of senior commanders by no means consists solely of 'Alawis. Certain Sunnis from a rural background, some Druze, and a few others are well integrated into their circle. The two most senior Sunnis, Shihabi and Talas, have already been mentioned. But their formal authority should not mislead us: At a time of struggle for power, the fight for Asad will be carried out by the 'Alawi divisions. Divisions commanded by Sunni officers are less important units, for instance mechanized infantry rather than armor, and are deployed farther away from Damascus. True, some posts, such as the command of the first corps and of the general security directorate, are reserved for Sunnis. But in the latter, actual control is exercised by the second-in-command, who is an 'Alawi.[23]

Positions 'Alawis hold in the civil administration must also be mentioned. Prominent among them is Muhammad Salman, the minister of information. In the party apparatus, four of the twenty-one members of the Regional Command are 'Alawis. So are 'Izz al-Din Nasir, chairman of the workers association, and Ahmad Daghram, in charge of preparatory education and of popular organizations. From among fourteen provincial governors, five are 'Alawis. They include the governors of the 'Alawi "heartland"—the coastal provinces of Ladhaqiyya and Tartus—'Abd al-Mun'im Hamawi and Ghani Khasra. But 'Alawi strength in the "formal" (i.e., civil) government apparatus is clearly less pronounced than in military and security positions.[24]

## SUNNI FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES

Next to the 'Alawi "barons" another layer of influential figures exists: the group of Asad's personal friends and long-time associates, mostly Sunnis from rural areas who hold key positions in the formal state apparatus. Despite their positions, the source of their real strength is their personal closeness to Asad. Together with him, they form a kind of inner club or "kitchen cabinet" in which major decisions are formulated or policy choices made. Most of the members of this group have risen through the party cadres rather than through the military.

Among them is the vice president for foreign affairs, 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam. A native of the town of Banyas in the 'Alawi coastal strip, his friendship with Asad goes back to the end of the 1940s when he belonged to national students' association, then headed by Asad. While Asad rose in the army, Khaddam made his way in the party. In 1964 he was governor of Hama, in 1967 governor of Qunaytra, and after that, governor of Damascus province. When Asad took over, he appointed Khaddam minister of the economy and of foreign trade and, in 1970, foreign minister. Khaddam has held that post since 1985.[25]

Hikmat Shihabi, chief of staff since 1974, is a native of Aleppo. From 1968 to 1971, he was assistant to the head of the military security branch, a position that made it possible for him to help Asad during his final ascent to power. In 1971, Shihabi himself took over the security department. Over the years, he

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[22] See Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power."

[23] Ibid.

[24] See Ze'ev Eytan, "Hazava Hasuri" (The Syrian Army), in Avner Yaniv, Moshe Maoz, and Avi Kover, eds., *Surya V'Bitachon Israel* (Syria and Israel's National Security) (Tel Aviv: Ma'archot, 1991), pp. 155–170; Zisser, "The Succession Struggle in Damascus," *Middle East Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (September, 1995).

[25] See "al-Hukm al-Suri Yakhtariqu liKull Tabaqat al-Mujtam'a waTawa'ifihi" (Syrian intelligence is spread all over Syria and all over Syrian society), *al-Watan al-'Arabi,* August 26, 1988, pp. 30–33.

carried out a series of sensitive and confidential missions for Asad that went far beyond the formal scope of his position. Thus, at the end of 1973, he was sent to Washington to prepare for the U.S.-sponsored negotiations on the Syrian–Israeli disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights, which were then about to begin. In 1976, Shihabi prepared the ground for Syria's intervention in Lebanon. In 1978, despite the ongoing Iraqi–Syrian dispute, he was sent to Baghdad to try to put together a joint "rejection front" against Anwar Sadat's peace initiative toward Israel. Finally, in 1994 and 1995, he represented his country opposite Generals Ehud Barak and Amnon Shahak in the meetings of the Syrian and Israeli chiefs of staff—a remarkable sign of the trust Asad places in him.[26]

Mustafa Talas has been defense minister since 1972. He and Asad first met during their officer training at the Homs military academy where, back in 1952, they were in the same class. Talas rose through various army appointments, culminating in his tenure as chief of staff and deputy defense minister from 1968 till 1972. From this position, he assisted Asad during the final moves of his takeover. His present post was his reward.[27]

Also worth noting in this context are 'Abdallah al-Ahmar, assistant secretary-general of the Ba'th National Command, a native of al-Tall village, north of Damascus; Ra'uf al-Kasm, from Aleppo, who heads the national security bureau of the Ba'th party; and Muhammad al-Zu'bi, from Dar'a, formerly speaker of the People's Assembly and since 1987 prime minister.[28]

In his memoirs, James Baker recounts an instructive anecdote about Khaddam, who fell asleep during a long lecture by Asad on the inequity of the Sykes–Picot agreement.[29] The fact that Khaddam could afford to do so in the presence of the U.S. secretary of state and while Asad was speaking attests to the familiarity characteristic of his personal relationship with the Syrian president. Similarly, Talas's standing derives from his personal friendship with the president. He carries little weight in military matters and his main activity is patriotic speech-making at mass meetings and popular rallies. His rhetoric is often enough embarrassing to the president, but their long personal ties make Asad reluctant to replace him. Talas has published several books under his name that were apparently ghost-written; they came out in a publishing house owned by Talas's family.[30]

This inner "club" is sometimes enlarged by the addition of new figures with the appropriate professional qualifications, yet who do not have a similarly long history of personal ties with Asad. Once they gain his personal trust, however, they count for as much as the veterans. A conspicuous example of such an entrant to the inner circle is Faruq al-Shara, the foreign minister. Shara, a Sunni from Dar'a, made his way up as a foreign ministry official. When Foreign Minister Khaddam became vice president for foreign affairs, Asad appointed Shara to succeed him. Initially, Shara was meant to be no more than Khaddam's mouthpiece, but he soon carved out a position of real influence for himself and has since come to compete with Khaddam in the shaping of foreign policy. Today he is in charge of the peace process with Israel.[31]

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[26] Hayim Shabi, "Pegishat Haramatkalim" (The meeting of the Chiefs of Staff), *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, June 30, 1995, p. 1; Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 226–249, 311, 355.

[27] See Mustafa Talas's autobiography, *Mir'at Hayati* (The Story of My Life) vols. 1, 2 (Damascus: Dar Talas lil-Nashr, 1992).

[28] See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 182–183; Syrian Television, June 29, 1992; and Damascus Radio, June 30, 1992.

[29] James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York:G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 461.

[30] See Mustafa Talas, *al-Ghazw al-Isra'ili liLubnan* (The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon) (Damascus: Mu'assasat Tishrin lil-Sahafa wal-Nashr, 1985); idem., *al-Thawra al-'Arabiyya al-Kubra* (The Great Arab Revolt) (Beirut: Dar al-Shura, 1987).

[31] See Zisser, "Syria," *Middle East Contemporary Survey* 19.

Shara's career is proof again that Asad habitually confers the conduct of state policy, and particularly of foreign policy, upon Sunni figures who belong to his inner entourage. Thus, Syrian affairs in Lebanon are entrusted to Khaddam and Shihabi. The two also deal with the complex Syrian–Iranian relationship— Khaddam from the political angle, Shihabi from the angle of defense policy. The trust Asad places in these men as a group was well illustrated in 1983–84 when the president was gravely ill and appointed an exclusively Sunni group to act as an interim presidential college.

A similar group of Sunnis deals with social and economic issues, although this group is not as firmly consolidated as the group previously discussed. The central figures are the deputy prime minister and minister of economy and foreign trade, Muhammad al-'Imadi; the deputy prime minister for economic affairs, Salim Yasin; and the deputy prime minister for public services, Rashid Akhtirini. Policies laid down by this inner circle may never go beyond the political consensus of the larger coalition its members represent, but, as partners, they lend an air of legitimacy to presidential decisions, and they provide him with the personal sense of having the backing of men he trusts.

If the Sunnis owe their standing to Asad, he in turn needs their politically and personally supportive presence. They are important to him and their closeness is significant in his eyes. Yet under pressure, he may let one or another of them go. No risk attaches to doing so, since none of them possesses a personal power base of his own. The character of the relationship is well brought out by the rise and eventual fall, in 1979, of Naji Jamil. A Sunni and a native of Dir al-Zur, he had his pilot training together with Asad. Although, unlike Asad, he never completed it, he was eventually chosen to replace Asad as the commander of the air force. For years, he belonged to the inner circle, But when he once challenged Asad—that is, when he undermined his role as the architect of the Corrective Revolution of November 1971—he was dismissed and, for some time, placed under house arrest.[32]

## LONGTIME ASSISTANTS AND PERSONAL ASSOCIATES

The final group consists of Asad's professional assistants and advisers. These are individuals without a background in politics, but Asad gathered them around himself during his slow rise to power and they are loyal to him personally. They carry no weight in the decision-making process and their activities are confined to technical matters. Among them are Muhammad Dib Da'bul (Abu Salim), a Sunni from the small town of Dir 'Atiyya, who is Asad's *chef de cabinet* and arranges his daily schedule; Jubran Khuriyya, a Protestant, spokesman of the president and in charge of public relations; As'ad Kamil Elyas, a Greek Orthodox, who is Asad's speechwriter; and Khalil Sa'dawi, in charge of protocol. They had all held the same positions before Asad's advent to power and Asad turned them into personal loyalists by keeping them in their posts.[33]

The way all these people crowd around Asad illustrates the highly personal character of the regime and the "clubbishness" of its top layer. The great distance between mere professional advisers and true political partners does not alter that fact. One thing must not be lost from sight: In terms of modern staff work and of expert input into a well-ordered decision-making process, the highest stratum of the regime presents a picture of weakness and paucity. This point shall be discussed, along with its negative consequences, later on.

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[32] See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 438; also based on an interview with a Syrian academic in Geneva, April 21, 1995.
[33] See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 179–180.

# IV

## The Decision-Making Process

The nature of the decision-making process in Syria is a function of the structure of the Syrian rule and its peculiarities. Taking into consideration the personal nature of this regime, the process is also, or mainly, a function of President Hafiz al-Asad's character and personality. It also needs saying that the decisions discussed here are major choices on strategic issues or matters of principle. Tactical considerations on how to carry out major decisions are left for discussion at a secondary or more junior level. Moreover, Asad and his inner circle think largely in terms of foreign and defense policy and devote less thought to social and economic issues. The latter are more often dealt with in the framework of the "formal" state apparatus.

### THE ROLE OF ASAD'S PERSONALITY

It is a basic fact of political life in Syria that Asad is reluctant to make decisions. Personality traits like a certain passivity, great caution, suspicion, hesitancy, and slowness make him so. They have been reinforced by the lessons he has drawn from the course of his political career and by the lack of any familiarity with the West. Together, they produce a rather narrow view of the world.

The passive strain in him causes Asad to prefer, on most occasions, a policy of wait and see. (This was also largely true of former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir; in 1991, when the United States wanted to bring the two to the negotiating table, they were called "the odd couple.") Reviewing more than twenty-five years of Asad's presidency, it is difficult to point to initiatives he has taken. When Syria joined the 1973 war, it followed an Egyptian initiative. When it joined the anti-Iraqi coalition in August 1990, it followed—willingly enough—a U.S. initiative. When it joined the Madrid peace conference in October 1991, it followed the U.S. lead again—though this time reluctantly and only in response to pressure.

When Asad finally makes decisions, they are usually in reaction to the decisions of others, or they follow from constraints or from situations offering no alternative. His reactions are often highly expedient, politic, and appropriate, but they are reactive all the same: He habitually passes up the advantage of seizing the initiative. Such habits, one may assume, reflect an awareness of limited strength. They also flow from past experience, which has taught him the wisdom of letting his adversary act, expand his strength—and fail.

Defensiveness is another recurring feature; Asad's suspicious and distrustful nature, as well as many recollections from his struggle for power, put him on his guard. So does his view of Syria as the stronghold of Arabism, permanently beleaguered by imperialism and Zionism. He would probably hold this to be true of any period of modern Syria after independence, but most certainly of Syria since the rise of the Ba'th party. Such perceptions engender what has been called a "bunker mentality." Significantly, Asad hardly ever leaves Syria, and he spends most of his time in the confines of the presidential palace.

His attitude toward the peace process with Israel as well as toward the broader changes in the Middle East during the 1990s illustrates this mindset. He does not see these developments as (to quote James Baker) a "window of opportunities," to be exploited with creative drive and vigor, but rather as an existential threat to Syria that he must ward off as best he can. Defensive in character, his moves are intended to slow down and circumscribe the emergence of a new order in the region—mainly peace and normalization with Israel, or increasing political and economic ascendancy of the United States.

These characteristics also explain why Asad often prefers indirect tactics to confronting a new situation head-on. Such a tactical concept underlies his use of acts of terror as bargaining counters vis-à-vis Israel, Turkey, or, in the past, Jordan. Such acts are not carried out by agents of the Syrian state but by willing "volunteers"—Kurds, Lebanese, or Palestinians—keen to perform them anyway, but glad of Asad's patronage.

No less distinctive are the qualities of caution, suspicion, and hesitancy that may become well-nigh obsessive. They often stem from a perception of regional or international events as part of larger conspiratorial schemes against Syria or against Asad himself. In May 1996, for instance, Asad found a connection between the elections in Israel, the tensions between Syria and Turkey (conjuring up the danger of a military confrontation), and a simultaneous cooling-off of Syria's relations with Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and the United States. His information minister, Muhammad Salman, stated the president's conclusion: Syria was falling victim to a broad conspiracy against it.[1]

Asad's inclination to view himself as the permanent victim of imperialism and Zionism derives from the way he interprets the course of his personal and political career. According to Patrick Seale, for instance, Asad saw the June 1967 War as an attempt by Israel and the United States to bring down the Syrian regime. Following the October War of 1973, he thought of the emerging U.S.–Egyptian cooperation as an act hostile to Damascus and one intended to deny Syria what it had gained on the battlefield.[2] Such views hark back to the old basic concept that imperialism and Zionism wish to impose their power on the Arab world; that, to do so, they strive to keep it in a state of fragmentation; and that Syria is the only Arab state resolved to stand up to them.

To the above traits must be added the deeply conservative strain in Asad's personality. He dislikes change and consecrates the status quo. The largely static state of Syria's political system, society, and economy and, as noted above, the infrequency of personnel changes in his inner circle, attest to Asad's aversion to change. He clings to the system in which he grew up and to the men who accompanied him on the road to power. He found confirmation for the correctness of his attitudes in the collapse of the Soviet Union: The way he sees it, it was the attempt to reform its system that brought down the USSR.

Finally, the relative narrowness of Asad's world view must be noted. He has no good knowledge of the political culture of the West. He has never been overseas for any length of time—the only exception being a prolonged stay in Egypt at the time of the Syrian–Egyptian merger (the United Arab Republic). His education consisted of that offered at the Air Force Academy, added to by additional military courses he passed later on. His knowledge of foreign languages is limited; he has a rudimentary knowledge of English and Russian. Although his experience of Syrian politics is unsurpassed, he has trouble grasping the essentials of Western political conduct. The concepts of democracy, the free-market economy, and

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[1]   Ibrahim Hamidi, "Wazir al-I'lam al-suri lil-Sharq al-Awsat" (The Syrian Information Minister to al-Sharq al-Awsat), *al-Sharq al-Awsat,* June 6, 1996, p. 4.

[2]   See Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria—The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 117–141, 226–249; see also Mustafa Talas, *Mir'at Hayati* (The Story of My Life), vol. 2 (Damascus: Dar Talas lil-Nashr, 1992), pp. 802–861.

open diplomacy remain foreign to him. That public diplomacy should be an inescapable part of Israeli politics and of the permanent play of its public opinion is incomprehensible to him. These limitations make it difficult for him to communicate with Western interlocutors and to assess their intentions, whether in times of military confrontation or in the course of negotiations. This is probably what caused Shimon Peres—at the end of the prolonged and eventually barren Syrian–Israeli talks that Yitzhak Rabin bequeathed him—to speak of Asad as "a peasant from the provinces."[3] Western interlocutors usually came away with a less discordant assessment, but they, too, were wont to complain that Asad had trouble grasping, let alone internalizing, the Western concept of what negotiations should signify. Their meetings with him were often much prolonged by detailed "educational" lectures on the part of the president. This rendered them very different from the businesslike talks of give-and-take to which they were accustomed.[4] Yet, when discussions touch on the inter-Arab arena or on Lebanon rather than on international affairs, he shows a much better grasp of affairs. He therefore finds it easier to be active in these spheres.

All the above makes it understandable why Asad should be stronger on tactics than on strategy. Indeed, he has often been described as a brilliant tactician, but that does not alter the fact that, as a rule, his decisions remain merely tactical. They do not point to an overarching strategic aim guiding his actions—at least not an aim that lies within the realm of practical politics. By contrast, his ultimate vision of the world—a world in which all Arabs are united and Israel no longer exists—may well continue to be valid for him.

The lack of realistic strategic planning for the long term is largely the corollary of the way Asad's mind works. But it has also to do with the absence of a staff capable of assisting him in strategic planning. Seale, for one, points out that Asad has no competent staff able to submit data to him for further discussion or new decisions, or even capable of following up on the execution of earlier measures. He also mentions that, when the flow of events requires real-time information, Western media reports are often Asad's prime source.[5]

Another consequence of the personality traits described above is Asad's inclination to handle details himself. Seale stresses both Asad's method of concentrating decisions in his own hands and his ability to deal with details. This may not really be a method but rather a certain, often momentary, fascination with some particular detail he deems personally or politically important.[6] In dealing with major issues, such as the peace process with Israel, his personal regard for minutia turns into a permanent feature of the proceedings. His full grasp of detail places Asad in a position of superiority vis-à-vis his associates and gives him added confidence in himself and in his stance in front of others. The ad hoc method of gathering detailed data and of painstakingly examining them one by one is time consuming. It therefore makes it easier for Asad to adjust to the situation in his own good time and to bring himself to make decisions that do not conform all too well to his overall world view—for instance with regard to Israel.

In this context, the Hindawi affair mentioned above should be reconsidered. As best as can be surmised, Muhammad Khuli (then head of the air force security directorate) instructed Nizar al-Hindawi to proceed with the plan to blow up an El Al airliner after take-off from London, without first obtaining Asad's consent. It would have been out of character for a man as conservative, cautious, and hesitant as

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[3] "Peres: Asad Hitnaheg kelkar Zar Ofaqim" (Peres: Asad behaved like a peasant from the provinces), *Ma'ariv*, November 13, 1996, p. 6; also based on an interview by the author with Shimon Peres in Jerusalem, April 25, 1995.

[4] Interviews by the author with American officials in Washington, D.C., June 23 and 25, 1996; see also Baker, pp. 461–463.

[5] See Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 177–179.

[6] Ibid., pp 169–183.

Asad to approve a project involving the killing of a large number of Israeli civilians by a man who could be traced back to the Syrian embassy in London—with all the consequences likely to follow from that. Whatever the case, Khuli was dismissed from his post. But Asad apparently could not bring himself to discharge him from the air force or to remove him altogether from the inner establishment. On the contrary, Khuli became deputy commander of the air force and several years after the incident its commander. Obviously, the Hindawi affair needed a response at the time, but Khuli did not therefore lose Asad's trust.[7] The Hindawi affair shows how much leeway Asad may at times leave his subordinates. He may, if he wishes, go into the smallest details with them, but on other occasions he may issue only loose guidelines to those he trusts, without interfering in their execution. Khuli may well have assumed that the Hindawi plan was within the framework of the overall guidance he had received from the president.

## A DIFFERENCE IN TIMETABLES

One way or another, Asad's personal characteristics and the decision-making mechanism that results from it make for exceeding slowness, except in rare cases when a quick decision is imperative. More than that: Asad's timetable seems to rest on a perception of time very different from that of his Western interlocutors. He is, after all, not accountable to his public for any particular time frame, nor is he bound by a fixed presidential tenure or election cycle. There is no four-year pulse, as in the United States or in Israel, nor any other preset rhythm. This, of course, renders him greatly different than the Western politicians or officials he meets.

His sense of timing frees him from the need for short-term achievements. He can, and does, conduct his country's affairs from a sense of history—often enough an exaggerated one. He examines current events under the aspect of their long- and longest-term effects, certainly not in terms of weeks or months, perhaps even in decades rather than years. At times it seems as if he is looking beyond the horizon. In assessing long-term consequences, his yardstick is often that of ideology. Yet if this clashes with current constraints, the latter will usually win out—but the outcome of such a clash is never a foregone conclusion and the scales may not tip all the way in one direction or the other. This may give Asad an advantage over others, but it may also make him cling to a far-off vision rather than develop a realistic strategy.

The four years of Syrian–Israeli negotiations provide a salient example of how Asad's sense of time differs from that of his counterparts. At every turn, the Israeli negotiators were aware of the constraints the lapse of time was placing upon them. They strove to conclude the negotiations within the time span at their disposal. In doing so, they were, of course, not oblivious of the political benefit an agreement would bring them at election time, provided there was an appropriate interval to prepare domestic public opinion and enlist its support. This tendency became more marked after Rabin's assassination. Both Israel and the United States began urging Asad to speed up the negotiations. But in Asad's view, such pressure was meant to entrap him in rash decisions, and he responded by saying that Syria had all the time it needed to

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[7]  See Alain Chouet, "'Alawi Tribal Space Tested by Power: Disintegration by Politics," *Maghreb–Machrek,* (January–March 1995), pp. 93–119; "I'fa Ra'is al-mukhabarat al-Suriyya" (The head of Syrian Intelligence was fired), *al-Muharrir,* September 26, 1994, p. 1; Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey* 19 (1995), pp. 595–596.; Seale, *Asad of Syria,* pp. 475–482.

carry on until its demands were met.[8] He interpreted Israeli and U.S. references to the time factor as an attempt to corner him and to extract concessions he was unwilling to make.

Lebanon provides another example of the difference in time scales. When Israel launched "Operation Grapes of Wrath" in April 1996—intended to prevent further rocket attacks on Israeli towns and settlements along the Lebanese border—it meant to limit operations to a period of a few weeks. (Again, election constraints came into play in setting the time frame.) But whereas Israel was impatient and in a hurry, Asad—as always where Lebanon was concerned—was endlessly patient. It must be remembered that no fewer than fourteen years of alternating success, failure, or deadlock elapsed between the first direct Syrian intervention in Lebanon in 1976 and the time it matured into the present "Syrian order" there.

An analysis of Asad's functioning in the past leaves one with the impression that he has difficulties in finding his way in complex, multifaceted situations and that he is liable to misinterpret his adversaries' aims and strategies. He is at his best when operating in his familiar political environment, in clearly delineated circumstances, and with plenty of time to consider his moves. But in dealing with personalities whose world view and political culture is foreign to him, his performance is less impressive. A number of examples for this can be seen in earlier phases of the Syrian–Israeli relationship that seem to have left their mark on his mind.

In June 1967, for instance, Asad—then a young defense minister—clearly misread the Middle Eastern situation and failed to grasp the nature of the escalation in the Arab–Israeli dispute that he and his associates were helping to bring about and which was presently to lead to the outbreak of war. Seale relates that the Israeli attack on the Golan Heights came as a total surprise to Asad. During the 1973 war and its aftermath in the following year, Asad found it difficult to assess the real nature and aims of Sadat's moves. He suffered a surprise of strategic dimensions when he discovered, as the war proceeded, that Sadat had gone to war with strictly limited military aims, but with clearly defined political goals. Asad, by contrast, had gone to war for the sole purpose of completely recovering the Golan Heights. The divergence of war aims and the failure to establish strategic coordination during the course of hostilities foiled Asad's intention. He was surprised once more when it became clear to him at the conclusion of fighting that the United States and Israel had started to work for an Israeli–Egyptian peace. As this bilateral peace process advanced, it turned out to have a far-reaching deleterious impact on Syria's strategic position.[9] And again, in 1982, Asad was surprised to discover that the Israeli campaign in Lebanon was not so much directed against the PLO as it was meant to loosen Syria's grip on Lebanon. It was only owing to Israel's subsequent mistakes that Syria was able to rebuild its position in Lebanon.[10]

On the other hand, it must be noted that Asad was one of the first leaders in the Arab world, perhaps one of the first leaders anywhere, who understood the full import of Gorbachev's reforms. Sooner than others, sooner too than his associates in the Syrian establishment, he grasped the threat of a total collapse of the Soviet regime, and the concomitant danger to continued Soviet aid to Syria. Then again, Asad was

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[8] See interviews given by Prof. Itamar Rabinovich, the Israeli ambassador to the United States and the head of the Israeli delegation to the peace negotiations: Yerach Tal, "Rabinovich le-Ha'aretz: Bishnat 1995 biqsho Hasurim miBaker Lif'ol kimetavech" (Rabinovich to Ha'aretz: In 1995 the Syrians asked Baker to mediate), *Ha'aretz*, August 22, 1996, p. 4A; and on Kol Yisrael, December 3, 1996.

[9] Seale, *Asad of Syria*, pp. 226–249.

[10] See Ehud Ya'ari and Ze'ev Schiff, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984) pp. 283–221; Mustafa Talas, *al-Ghazw al-Isra'ili liLubnan* (The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon) (Damascus: Mu'assasat Tishrin lil-Sahafa wal-Nashr, 1985), pp. 381–419.

a long-time ally of the Soviet Union and knew the Soviet system well. Moreover, he was given rather early warning: During a visit to Moscow in 1987, the Soviet president told him bluntly that Syrian–Soviet relations were about to be affected by overall changes in Soviet international policy. Soon afterward, the Soviet Union began limiting the supply of offensive weapons to Syria and demanding cash payment for arms still to be furnished. (Until then, deliveries had been made on the basis of long-term credits.) No less significant a change, in Syrian eyes, was Soviet permission for Jews to emigrate to Israel.[11] Asad realized that the Soviet commitment to his regime was a thing of the past. He understood the need to reorient Syria's foreign policies and, though slowly and haltingly, he proceeded to redesign them. (Asad's policy during the Gulf crisis provides another example of his political acumen and his ability, when absolutely necessary, to act promptly, as will be seen in the next section).

## BA'THISM VERSUS PRAGMATISM

Another major factor to be considered when discussing the Syrian decision-making process is Asad's commitment, alongside that of the members of the inner circle, to the basic tenets of the Ba'th ideology. Visible faithfulness to the party doctrine is one of the means for making new policies appear legitimate in the eyes of the Syrian public at large—and of the Arab world as a whole—and of gaining support for them.

Yet for all the genuineness of the ideological commitment, when it comes to making actual policy choices, Asad's doctrine finds itself ranged against the exigencies of his pragmatism. The tension between them is often tangible and manifest. Comprehending it lies at the heart of every endeavor to assess Syrian policies, on whatever issue, and may well provide the key to understanding the longevity of Asad's regime. This ever-present clash between short-term aims dictated by realities and the vision of long-term goals causes the regime to delineate red lines that must not be crossed even for the sake of immediate gain. They demarcate the outer limits of any admissible compromise somewhere along the scale between the two poles.

Such red lines may shift from time to time. Until 1991 for instance, recognition of Israel or readiness to sign any agreement—let alone a peace treaty—with it were taboo. True, Syria took pains to keep the border with Israel quiet and was ready to enter into certain tacit understandings, especially with regard to the situation in Lebanon. But such pragmatic attitudes were not allowed to mitigate the ideological rejection of peace negotiations. Yet in 1991, Syria joined the peace process, thereby apparently abandoning one of the red lines that had existed since the inception of the regime. Asad has since declared several times that he is ready to arrive at a peace agreement with Israel, and the steps he has taken in the meantime can be interpreted as de facto recognition of the State of Israel.

But the old red lines have been shifted rather than dropped: The new ones now lay down that even peace must not result in full normalization or connote actual reconciliation. In Asad's view, peace should be no more than a carefully circumscribed political deal—a cold peace not much different than a mere agreement of nonbelligerency. It would not signal the termination of the Israeli–Syrian or Israeli–Arab dispute but rather would signify its removal to the back burner. The conflict would be transformed from a

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[11] Daniel Pipes, *Damascus Courts the West: Syrian Politics, 1989–1991*, Policy Paper no. 26 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1991), pp. 13–16; John Hannah, "Moscow Hits Brakes on Syria," *New York Times,* November 28, 1989, p. 25; see Asad's speech on the occasion of the Ba'th revolution day in 1990, "al-Qa'id al-Asad Yulqi Kalima Tarihiyya Shamila" (President Asad delivers a "national" speech), *al-Thawra* (Damascus), March 9, 1990, pp. 1–3.

military one into a political, an economic, and above all a cultural confrontation. As such, it would not invalidate the ultimate vision, which—it must be remembered—includes the liberation of all of Palestine from the Zionist occupier.[12]

The tension of ideology versus pragmatism explains the need of Asad and his inner establishment to ensure a broad popular consensus on every single step taken along the path toward making a major decision. If a consensus is not forthcoming spontaneously, public opinion must be guided toward it and mobilized for it, and the legitimacy of the new line must be made clear for all to see. To understand this almost compulsive need, it must be remembered that the Ba'th regime was for a long time highly controversial in the Arab world and, after more than twenty-five years, it still lacks full self-confidence. The desire for consensus can also be attributed to the fact that Syria's leaders are men who came from a socially marginal background and started their political careers in an ideological movement that had to struggle long and hard to gain recognition.

The required appearance of legitimacy for decisions made by Asad personally and by the Syrian leadership as a body is secured in the following ways:

• Through constant consultations between Asad and the inner circle. The reactions of his associates are the political and personal litmus tests for any action proposed by the president. Making them partners in his decisions gives the president added confidence and helps him to overcome doubts and misgivings. The fact that many of them are Sunnis rather than 'Alawis enhances and adds to the sense of legitimacy.

• Through having other government institutions confirm or ratify decisions already made. The cabinet, the People's Assembly, and the National Progressive Front are all called upon to endorse presidential decisions. The decision-making process itself is accompanied by frequent meetings of party bodies at the local, district, and countrywide level. These are meant to prepare public opinion for decisions about to be made and, later, to provide an additional layer of legitimacy—this time granted by the public at large rather than by the small and closed community of the president's personal associates.

• And finally, through intensive use of the government-controlled media.

At the same time, it is worth noting that Western representatives who have been in touch with Asad often come away with the impression that his problem is not so much how to persuade his associates or how to win broad public support; rather, his main problem is with himself: how to evade decisions running counter to his beliefs and principles, and how to keep his actions compatible with his broader world view.[13] Once he had passed the stage of soul-searching and had arrived at a decision with which he was comfortable, these interlocutors believed Asad could count on gaining support for it—whether on the part of his associates or on the part of the public at large.

Obviously, he is neither able nor willing to act like Sadat did in surprising his own people by going to Jerusalem. Nor would he detach himself from the bulk of his establishment as Sadat did when he went to Camp David. It is unthinkable that Asad would make a dramatic and revolutionary decision—one marking a major departure from the past—while being practically isolated and without first thoroughly

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[12] See for example, "Risalat 'Azim al-Umma lil-Sha'b" (The message of the great leader to his people), *al-Thawra* (Damascus), March 12, 1992, p. 3; "Jamahir al-Sha'b Tujaddidu 'Ahd al-Wafa wal-Wala' lil-Qa'id al-Asad" (The masses express their commitment and loyalty to the leader, Hafiz al-Asad), *al-Thawra* (Damascus), April 19, 1994, p. 1; "Dhikr al-Nasr al-'Azim" (A great victory to remember), *al-Thawra* (Damascus), October 6, 1994, p. 1.

[13] Interviews by the author with American officials in Washington, D.C., June 23 and 25, 1996; see also a lecture by Itamar Rabinovich, "Politics and Foreign Policy in Syria under Asad," at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, October 9, 1996.

preparing domestic opinion for it. On the contrary, what he is seeking is the lowest common denominator (in Syrian terms). He tests the waters and will then swim with the current, not against it.


THE IMPORTANCE OF HONOR

Another factor, perhaps in some way linked to the ideological commitment, is Asad's high regard for honor. Personal honor and the honor of Syria as a whole must be upheld at all times and at any price. Again, the importance of honor must be seen against the personal background of Asad as representative of the (formerly marginal) 'Alawi community; as leader of a country against which, from the 1940s until the 1960s, the Arab world placed a question mark; and finally as a leader in the Arab nation, which as a whole has been despoiled by the West for two centuries. All three aspects are vital for understanding the inferiority complex that observers have noted in Asad's contacts with outsiders and which often finds expression in an unyielding intransigence. Such rigidity may seem pointless to others but for Asad it answers an intrinsic need.

These trends are at work in the Syrian refusal to let Israel use an early warning station on Mt. Hermon in exchange for a similar, Syrian-controlled station on Israeli territory in Galilee; or in the rejection of any suggestion to cut down the size of the Syrian army or to demilitarize the area between Damascus and the border. The presentation of such demands by Israel led Asad to break off the negotiations because, in his view, they touched upon the honor of Syria and were therefore beyond the scope of any possible compromise.[14]

Regard for upholding honor is in turn linked with the need to project an image of strength. In the Middle East, demonstrating strength is one of the means of asserting legitimacy; possessing strength in turn engenders legitimacy. Messages of toughness are considered useful not only if broadcast in the direction of domestic enemies, but also when pointed toward external adversaries, such as Israeli or U.S. negotiators.

This concludes the paper's discussion of the Syrian decision-making process. The inherent difficulties that sometimes make it appear destructively counterproductive to the Western observer have been described. But there is no arguing with success: The structure of Asad's state and government and his methods of running Syria have kept him in power for twenty-seven years. He has often enough been capable of turning liabilities into advantages. Although they may greatly delay his reactions, he has been able to turn slowness and caution to good account. More than that: When a truly existential danger loomed, Asad has found the strength to make quick, resolute, and hazardous decisions. In the next chapter some of those decisions will be reviewed.

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[14] See No'ami Levitzki, "Asad Kone sheqet Bekalkala Nosah Aridor," (Asad buys time by adopting "Aridor-style" economy), *Yedi'ot Aharonot,* pp. 14–15; and Itamar Rabinovich, lecture, October 9, 1996.

# V

## Decision Making Illustrated

On occasion, despite his tendency toward hesitation and reaction, Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad has been able to make fast and difficult decisions. The total repression of the antiregime Muslim movement is a case in point. This was done under exceptional circumstances and the decision to act was made with great inner difficulty; Seale remarks that Asad needed Rif'at's prodding to move.[1] But the decisive character of the drive against the Muslim Brotherhood has not remained unparalleled. It was seen in Asad's entry into Lebanon in 1976 and again in his readiness to risk a confrontation with Israel over the so-called missile crisis in 1981; in the struggle against Israel and the West in Lebanon a year later; in the foiling of the Israeli–Lebanese peace treaty of April 1983; and in the assault, in October 1990, against General 'Awn's last stronghold—an action that opened the way to the implementation of the 1989 Ta'if accord and thus to the reordering of the Lebanese situation. Another example of an activist policy resolutely pursued is provided by the use, in 1985–86, of terrorist methods to foil U.S. efforts for launching an Israeli–Jordanian–Palestinian peace process. A proper assessment will have to keep both aspects in full view.

Yet, three issues are currently on the Syrian agenda and awaiting resolution: the succession, the Syrian–Israeli peace process, and the opening to the West. The extent to which the elements of decision making outlined earlier are present and discernible in Asad's response to each issue will be examined, and a fouth section will review one issue that Asad dealt with in an exceptional manner, thus setting it apart from the others: Syria's part in the anti-Iraqi coalition of 1990–91.

### THE SUCCESSION

The issue of succession, although perhaps not quite at the top of the Syrian agenda, nevertheless occupies a central spot on it. It has already been noted that the most obvious danger to the stability and cohesion of the present regime comes from within, not from a domestic opposition (there are no significant opposition groups in the country) but rather from inside the ranks of Asad's establishment. True, the domestic coalition on which the regime rests is stable and representative and enjoys broad domestic support. Yet any tremor in its ranks, and particularly in the 'Alawi component—the principal provider of the "glue" holding it together—could prove menacing. The absence of a recognized heir thus presents a danger.

Ostensibly, the Syrian constitution resolves the succession issue. Asad himself has professed to see no cause to worry over what would happen if he dies. He told an interviewer:

> I have never been concerned, for the simple reason that the Syrian Constitution . . . tackles the question. . . .
> The 21-member party leadership, which is elected by the party rank and file, and the People's Assembly,
> which is the supreme legitimate authority in the country and whose members are elected directly by the

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[1] See Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria—The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 316–338.

people, shall nominate the person of their choice by public referendum. If he attains the majority vote, then he wins. If he does not win, then they nominate someone else.[2]

But in Syria, formal provisions do not tell the whole story. An issue so momentous as that of the succession will no doubt first be taken up by the circle of the 'Alawi barons. They will nominate the candidate or, if some other quarter in the establishment puts forward a name, will confirm it or else turn it down. Only then will the procedure outlined by Asad be followed. The succession issue thus boils down to the question: Can the pivotal group of 'Alawis unite around a common candidate? If they do not, the destabilizing effect will be tremendous; precisely what form it will take cannot be assessed today.

Initially, as stated previously, Asad's brother Rif'at was considered next in line. But at the time, this was not a burning issue; Asad was only in his fifties and in good health. The story of Rif'at's bid for power when Asad had a heart attack in 1983 has already been told. Its lasting effect was that the succession issue has remained on the agenda ever since.[3] Yet during the 1980s, Asad preferred to leave the matter open. Only in the early 1990s, when his elder son Basil had completed the preparatory career steps Asad had devised for him to ready him for succession, and when he considered him personally and politically mature enough, did he take up the issue again. The public at large was now led to think of Basil as the recognized candidate for the succession, but his eldest son's death in 1994 forced Asad to transfer that status on his second son, Bashar, even though he was not the ideal candidate.

These developments provide a good illustration of Asad's methods of decision making and bring out his hesitant approach. Asad has long avoided taking a cut-and-dried stand on the matter. Even today, when all the signs point to Bashar's candidacy, Asad refrains from publicly proclaiming his intentions and from taking political measures that would go beyond the point of no return. Most probably, he will go on doing so, unless and until failing health or other outside constraints force him to change tack. Furthermore, with both Basil and Bashar, the process of preparation for the presidency was intended to be phased and laborious. Even when Basil's sudden death left Asad with a shorter time span than he had expected, he did not change his gradualist approach. The slowness of the procedure is the result of Asad's own intentions. A prolonged process allows him better control, which can easily be exercised anew at every turn. It will also enable him both to wait for conditions to mature and to take the final, irrevocable step at a moment of his own choosing—a moment to be set for its likelihood of assuring success.

Yet, the graded approach does not stem from Asad's personal predilections alone; political reasons also dictate that he proceed with caution. Keeping the issue open causes a certain tension among the members of the inner circle, which Asad may consider beneficial in that it reinforces their personal dependence on Asad himself. Moreover, an immediate decision on the succession is bound to cause those inner circle figures who fear for their status under the chosen successor to rise up against or otherwise oppose Asad. Given the advanced age of some of them, the longer a clear-cut decision is delayed, the fewer opponents will remain in the field. There is also, as Rif'at demonstrated so conclusively, the danger that a nominee too certain of the succession will not have the patience to wait his turn.[4]

Nevertheless, taking an overall view, one cannot escape the conclusion that leaving the issue undecided inevitably elicits the question of what will happen when delay is no longer possible. Will there be a clash, perhaps a violent one? Simply asking the question may turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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[2] Radio Damascus, August 1, 1984.

[3] See Eyal Zisser, "The Succession Struggle in Damascus," *Middle East Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (September 1995).

[4] Ibid.; see Douglas Jehl, "Syrians Struggle to Decipher Assad Clan's Dirty Laundry," *New York Times*, January 28, 1997, p. 1; idem., "New Riddles in Assad's Damascus," *International Herald Tribune*, January 29, 1997.

### THE SYRIAN–ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS

The issue of the peace negotiations goes beyond the question of the future relationship with Israel, ramified and complex as that may be. It has a bearing on a wide range of other questions, beginning with the stability of the regime once peace puts Syrians in touch with the political culture and the economic realities of Israel, and ending with its impact on Syria's inter-Arab and international relations, most particularly with the United States.

Syria's joining the peace process in 1991 was widely described as signifying a real change in its attitude toward Israel, or at least in its declared policy toward it. Some observers held that Asad and his associates were fully aware that once negotiations were entered into, a peace treaty would eventually result. The very agreement to join the process, they argued, signaled that Damascus had accepted peaceful relations with Israel as inevitable and was ready for them.[5]

And indeed, between 1992 and 1996, the negotiations made real progress, certainly if compared with the opening positions of both sides. Yet a final breakthrough eluded the negotiators. Israel's readiness to withdraw from all of the Golan Heights was not in itself sufficient to induce Asad to come forward with counter-concessions enabling the deal to be sealed. Even before the Israeli elections in May 1996, many in Israel and in the West doubted Asad's willingness or capability to lend substance to his proclamation that peace had become his country's strategic choice. After the elections, the new Likud government under Binyamin Netanyahu declared—at least as its opening bid—that Israel must retain the Golan Heights and that it would not consider itself bound by understandings formulated by its predecessor that were not formally signed by the two sides. This seemed to abort the chances for a Syrian–Israeli agreement in the discernible future—assuming that such chances had existed in the first place.[6]

But then this study does not deal with the substance of the peace negotiations, but rather uses them to elucidate Asad's way of moving forward in such a situation and to illuminate the problem he has in dissociating himself from ideological tenets formerly central to his world view. For him, joining the peace process did not imply rescinding a red line so much as it shifted it to new ground. Although it signified his willingness to enter into a political deal, it did not connote his readiness for a historical reconciliation between the two countries—hence his refusal to consider the elements of normalization.

This approach is brought out very well by the state-controlled Syrian media outlets, which speak of the negotiations as part of the permanent historical dispute between the two countries. What has changed, they affirm, is merely that instead of being conducted on the battlefield, the dispute is now being pursued around the negotiating table.[7] This invites the Syrian reader or listener to conclude that a peace agreement, if reached, will not terminate the dispute. The agreement, as adumbrated by the Syrian media, looks more like a somewhat improved agreement of nonbelligerency than a peace treaty. Devoid of the elements of normalization, it is meant to enable Syria to carry on the dispute in the shape of a low-intensity conflict. Asad would thus have the best of both worlds: He would be able to sign the agreement, but when more

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[5] See a lecture by Itamar Rabinovich, "Politics and Foreign Policy in Syria under Asad," at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, October 9, 1996; Eyal Zisser, "Syria and Israel: from War to Peace," *Orient* 36, no. 3 (September 1994), pp. 487–498.

[6] See Ze'ev Schiff, "Netanyahu Eyno Mekir Bahavanot Habilti Hatomot 'im Surya" (Netanyahu will not recognize unsigned understanding with Syria), *Ha'aretz*, August 16, 1996, p. 1A; Ben Kaspit and Hemi Shalev, "Netanyahu lo motzi Min Hakal Efsharot leMasa veMatan 'al Hagolan" (Netanyahu does not rule out negotiations on Golan), *Ma'ariv*, August 13, 1996, p. 2.

[7] See Eyal Zisser, "Asad Inches toward Peace," *Middle East Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (September 1995), pp. 37–44.

suitable to his purpose, he could still present himself as the struggler in constant pursuit of his ultimate vision and acting as his reading of the domestic scene and the inter-Arab arena dictates to him.

A political deal thus circumscribed seems to have been in the air in Damascus before the first actual steps were taken. One indication was that during the Gulf crisis Syria joined the anti-Iraqi coalition, which was then on the point of going to war against a fellow Arab state (a "sister" state, as Syrian usage would put it). In doing so, Asad had rendered proof that, under acute pressure from newly emerging realities, he was ready to bend some of the ideological principles to which he was committed. In this case, he flouted two central tenets: Arab unity and the struggle against the West.

Furthermore, once the actual peace process had started, Asad methodically prepared domestic public opinion for the possibility of an agreement with Israel—an agreement, the Syrian media kept stressing, that would uphold Syrian honor and safeguard its geopolitical position in the Middle East.

One can clearly discern that Asad felt the need to prove the legitimacy of his peace process policy at every turn. This can be illustrated by underlining several aspects of the way he faces challenges. For one thing, Asad refuses to establish secret channels of communication alongside the publicly recognized ones. Secret proceedings, he seems to feel, would be misinterpreted by the Syrian public and may be considered as proof that he had something to hide. For another, Asad takes pains to associate all the top ranks of the Syrian establishment with every phase of the negotiations and certainly with every decision taken in their course. Most of Asad's meetings with Baker and after him with Warren Christopher, as well as his meetings with Bush and Clinton, were attended by several members of his inner circle. The more decisive a meeting was expected to be, the greater their number. With the same purpose in mind, Asad made sure that every decision was confirmed by the formal government institutions as well as by the various leading party bodies. Thus, the foreign minister or other senior figures report periodically to the cabinet, the People's Assembly, and the National Progressive Front. Party branches and gatherings of local party activists meet for an update on the progress of the negotiations and for explanations of the problems involved in them. The media are enlisted for much the same purpose with regard to the public at large (whether party members or not). The burden of their arguments is that the Syrian leadership is not deviating from its ideological commitment or the principles of the party doctrine. (Changes in the tenor of the press are good indications of impending changes in policy.) Together, these measures are intended to prepare public opinion for an eventual agreement with Israel.[8]

Israeli and Western scholars have often claimed that there are differences of opinion, or least different shades of opinion, on the peace process within the Syrian establishment. An instance cited is that of Khaddam, the vice president for foreign affairs, who proclaims views more intransigent than those of Foreign Minister Shara. Yet, it must be remembered that Shara replaced Khaddam at the foreign ministry and is now the leading executor of Asad's policy toward Israel. He was the first (and so far the last) Syrian to break the old taboo and appear on Israeli television, in an interview broadcast in October 1994. He has made frequent statements affirming the need for progress in the peace process.[9] Their differences stem not from conflicting views on the substance of the talks but rather from disagreements on the scope of their authority within the establishment. Moreover, Shara is much younger than Khaddam and considerably more knowledgeable about the western world. Being in charge of the peace process, he is, or must appear to be, committed to it. Khaddam for his part is, among other things, in charge of relations with Iran, a Syrian fall-back position. Iran's attitude toward Israel and the peace process make it natural

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Israeli TV, Channel 1, October 7, 1994.

for Khaddam to adopt a more critical stance, at least in public. A comparison of their statements does not reveal substantive or deep-running differences; rather, they are a matter of nuances.

Several features characterize the Syrian conduct of the talks. One is the adoption of a passive stance: Asad shows no initiative and takes no steps to promote or accelerate the negotiations. He submits no proposals of his own, nor does he make counterproposals after turning down Israeli suggestions. He painstakingly avoids acting as if the conclusion of the talks was important to him.

Another feature is his suspicious approach. He is deeply suspicious of the motives that might lurk behind Israel's declared purposes or the stated intentions of the United States. Several factors combine to produce this attitude: Asad's personality; his lack of understanding of Western political culture; and some lessons he has drawn from his previous experience with Israel or the United States. For instance, he is convinced that Kissinger and Sadat deceived him when they made him believe that, after the conclusion of the Israeli–Egyptian talks that followed the 1973 war, they would turn to deal with Syria's problems. In fact—as Asad sees it—he was left no choice but to resign himself to the Israeli–Egyptian interim accords. A few years later, these led to the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty, which gravely damaged his vital interests. As he noted with resentment, all important details had been agreed upon behind his back.[10]

To these tendencies should be added Asad's inclination to take up minute details personally—at times losing sight of the forest by looking too closely at single trees. In his view, the peace agreement should be put together gradually by working out a multitude of discrete individual tactical points by inductive methods, rather than being deduced from basic principles of an overall strategic kind. Furthermore, one can sense the trouble Asad has in conducting negotiations in the ambiance of the 1990s. Thus, for instance, the role public diplomacy necessarily occupies under present conditions is foreign to his concepts. Consequently, he refrains from making use of the international media to advance his cause. Similarly, he can hardly comprehend the constraints imposed on Israel by its democratic practices.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the sense of time with which the Syrians come to the negotiating table differs radically from that of the Israeli and U.S. representatives. The latter were keenly conscious of the lapse of time as elections were approaching in both their respective countries in 1996. Asad, by contrast, held that this could have no substantial impact on his decisions and rigorously refused to let considerations of timing on the part of others influence his own conduct of the negotiations. The idea that his country should adopt a more flexible stand because of their constraints was anathema to him.

## OPENNESS TOWARD THE WEST

The policies of political and even more so of economic openness toward the West, adopted by Damascus during the last few years, pose an evident dilemma for the Syrian regime. Although conscious that current circumstances do not afford Syria an alternative, the leadership also understands that openness is bound to loosen to some degree the grip it has on domestic affairs—just as has happened in other Middle Eastern countries in similar situations. Both the fall of Ceausescu in Romania and the collapse of the Soviet Union contributed in eliminating other choices. So did Syria's joining the peace process. The old Ba'th slogan of "Unity, Liberty, and Socialism," so often used to mobilize support in the past, no longer found an echo anywhere. Neither did the call for fighting the "Zionist enemy" to the finish. Voices in Damascus demanded a shift toward democracy and market economy, implying criticism of the government for being

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[10] Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria,* pp. 226–249.

too similar to those regimes that had just collapsed. Asad took action to silence such criticism before it could grow too vociferous.[11]

One sign of this change was the regime's endeavor to make it appear that it had adopted a new order of priorities. At the top were efforts to raise the standard of living of all Syrians. Asad approved huge infrastructure investments to ensure adequate water and electricity supplies for all and to overcome the backward state of telecommunications and transportation. In the past, towns and cities, including Damascus, suffered from daily power outages and interruptions in water supply. Today, improvements have been achieved in both areas. Certain measures of economic liberalization have benefited private business, formerly the regime's economic step-child. The principal beneficiaries have been economic elites from among the urban Sunni population. Foreign investments have been encouraged, in the hope that they will promote economic growth and ease the lot of various population sectors. Urban Sunnis have also started playing a greater political role, for instance by being allotted more so-called "independent" seats in the People's Assembly. A similar trend is now discernible with regard to Islamist circles.[12]

But the entire process of openness and liberalization has obvious and fairly narrow limits:

• Asad ensures that there is no deviation—at least not in public—from Ba'th doctrine. The ideological doctrine to which he feels committed names "socialism" as one of its principles, and the Ba'th party's use of the term in the media and in public speeches is as frequent as ever, despite the measure outlined above.

• The basic social order and the overall structure of the economy are not being changed. The economy continues to be controlled largely by the bureaucracies of either the state or the party. Similarly, the political structure and the make-up of the establishment have remained as before. Economic benefits furnished to certain elites do not go hand in hand with greater access to the seats of real power.

In other words, Asad wishes to maintain the existing order that he has instituted over the years since 1970. His ideological commitment to that order remains the source of the legitimacy on which his regime rests; to abandon it would, in his judgment, have a destabilizing effect. So would any curtailment of the role—economic and otherwise—of the state or party bureaucracies that form an important power base of his and whose loyalty must not be impaired. Therefore, the co-opting of new elements—such as the urban Sunnis—into the ruling coalition must not proceed at the expense of its veteran components.

The way Asad has dealt with the issue of openness shows that he ignores the potential benefits of an energetic policy of social and economic initiatives. Syria's integration into the global economy, however partial it is likely to remain in the near future, is not being pursued as a desirable goal—on the contrary, Damascus seems to regard it with apprehension.


## SYRIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE GULF CRISIS—AN EXCEPTIONAL CASE?

On each of the above issues, Asad favored a wait-and-see policy. Throughout, one can discern his preference for a passive stance, most of all with regard to foreign policy choices. Yet his response to certain events—particularly the Gulf crisis—seem to challenge this overall assumption.

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[11] See Asad's response to such implied demands, "al-Qa'id al-Asad Yulqi Kalima Qawmiyya Hamma" (President Asad delivers an important national speech), *Tishrin*, March 9, 1990, pp. 1–3; "al-Ra'is al-Asad Yuhaddidu fi Kalima Tarkhiyya Akhar al-Tattwur al-Muqbil waMawqif Suriyya fi al-Qadaya al-'Arabiyya wal-Dawliyya" (President Asad explains in an historic speech the latest developments and the Syrian positions in Arab and international affairs), *Tishrin*, March 13, 1994.

[12] See Eyal Zisser's articles titled "Syria," in *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, vols. 14, (1990), pp. 654–655, and 18, (1994), pp. 615–617.

On the face of it, Asad's reactions to the crisis situation were quick, decisive, and informed by creative thinking. He was one of the first Arab leaders to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. He quickly joined Egyptian president Husni Mubarak in calling for an all-Arab summit; when it met at short notice, Syria supported its decidedly anti-Iraqi resolutions.[13]

Soon afterward, without undue hesitation, Asad joined the U.S.-led coalition and dispatched a contingent of Syrian troops to the Gulf. They took part, even though in a very modest role, in the campaign to liberate Kuwait. In doing all this, Asad was taking a certain risk because he was going against public opinion at home. The public mood, at least during the early stages of the crisis, sided with Baghdad. (This was not the first instance of Asad defying domestic opinion: He had done so, for instance, in 1976 when he sent troops to Lebanon to support the Maronite camp against the PLO and the Sunnis.)[14]

But some remarks questioning this description are in order. True, Asad was quick to understand the threat that the Iraqi operation against Kuwait posed to himself. Although it thoroughly surprised him, it substantiated his earlier fears that Iraq was slowly but surely turning into a peril for Syria. The threat from Baghdad had first developed in 1988 after the conclusion of the Iran–Iraq war and had grown since then. Iraqi statements hostile to Syria were becoming more frequent and more strident, and the motif of revenge against Damascus for its cooperation with Iran during the war came up more often.[15] The writing was on the wall and the dimensions of the threat could not be mistaken.

One sign of Iraq's policy taking an increasingly anti-Syrian turn was the attempt to isolate Syria on the Arab scene, for instance by establishing in 1989 the Arab Cooperation Council, a group that included Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, and North Yemen, and pointedly excluded Syria. Although defined primarily as economic, the group was not devoid of certain political overtones. Next, at the June 1990 Arab summit conference in Baghdad—which Syria did not attend—Iraq succeeded in isolating Syria from the rest of the participants. Moreover, Iraq rendered military assistance to General 'Awn in Lebanon, who was trying to resist the "new Syrian order" there. Baghdad tried to get ground-to-ground missiles through to 'Awn, which would have enabled him to hit Damascus from his small Beiruti enclave. It required quite an effort on the part of Syria to foil the scheme.[16] Against this background, it was easy for Asad to recognize the invasion of Kuwait as yet another move by an already familiar regional adversary who had by now given ample proof of his hostility.

Yet, as could be expected, Asad failed to take the initiative or to develop a dynamic policy of his own. He did not lead but rather joined others who did. True, this largely reflects the limitations of Syrian power; but even within these limits, Asad displayed extreme caution. Thus, by limiting his troops to the task of providing artillery support, he ensured that they did not engage in any real fighting. More than that: They were to hit only Iraqi targets on Kuwaiti soil, but not to shell Iraqi territory.

These developments therefore confirm that Asad is at his best when dealing with clearly delineated situations involving familiar figures acting on his familiar regional home ground. If such a situation turns into a threat and he finds himself with his back to the wall, he is capable of acting comparatively quickly. But in the absence of a clear threat, he prefers his habitual wait-and-see approach. Moreover, intricate

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[13] "al-Qa'id al-Asad Ya'udu ila Dimashq" (President Asad returns to Damascus), *Tishrin*, August 12, 1990, pp. 1–3.

[14] See Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the Gulf Crisis—Stepping on a New Path," *Orient* 34, no. 3 (1993), pp. 563–579; Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon 1970–1985* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 201–236.

[15] See statement by Iraqi foreign minister Tariq 'Aziz in Hamid Muna, "Tariq 'Aziz fi Hadith Shamil lil-Tadammun" (Tariq 'Aziz in an interview to al-Tadammun), *al-Tadammun*, July 9, 1990, pp. 16–20.

[16] See Zisser, "Syria and the Gulf Crisis," pp. 563–565.

situations with blurred outlines and involving unfamiliar actors cause him much more trouble than the kind the Gulf crisis presented to him.

Finally it must be noted that, most likely, Asad had total and consensual support from all quarters of his inner establishment. If public opinion was doubtful to begin with, it was soon brought round by a massive media campaign. The pivotal point of the campaign was to explain that it was not Syria which was acting against the spirit of Arab unity (as Saddam Hussein had argued), but rather Iraq itself. If Ba'th ideology stipulated Arab unity, Asad was its defender, Saddam its detractor.[17]

## CONCLUSION

On the face of it, the combined effect of the structure of the regime and Asad's personality traits does not leave interlocutors much negotiating leeway or room for maneuvering. It would appear that negotiating partners have little chance to influence the Syrian decision-making process. In initiating any move or in responding to the moves of others, the Syrian leadership will usually take counsel only with itself. This is as true of the peace process as of any other issue facing Asad.

Yet, Asad's past record suggests that an informed and balanced combination of applying pressure and offering incentives is likely to bring results. Pressure, however, must be exerted with a full understanding of Asad's political constraints and personal limitations. Negotiators must constantly keep the following considerations in mind:

First, negotiators must recognize that Asad's timeline is different than their own. His concept of time stems from his need to size up the situation gradually, think it through at length, consult with others, prepare public opinion, and construct a mantle of legitimacy for his decisions. All this must be understood, and Asad must be allowed sufficient time to complete the required conceptual reorientation and translate it into practice. Yet, again, the party facing him must not let itself be dragged along indefinitely. The existence of certain time limits must be brought home to Asad.

Second, therefore, Western negotiators must be able to act from a position of strength. As long as Asad does not feel that he has been pushed into a corner, he will hesitate and draw things out. True, the exceedingly slow moves he prefers will eventually produce results, but they will do so over a time span of years—and no Western negotiator can afford to sit back until things unfold on the time-scale suiting Asad. Negotiators must therefore be able to apply pressure, though it must not be of the harsh or visible kind that is repugnant to him, for that might turn out to be counterproductive. This means that the negotiator opposite the president must be able to rely on proven strength and firmness. Asad admires power and is likely to recoil when faced with superior strength.

Third, the negotiator must be fully aware of the constraints that the Ba'th ideology places on Asad and the regime. Asad has repeatedly objected to Israeli demands because, as he has said, Israel is trying to overload the peace process with elements it cannot carry.[18] Although his reference is to the process, what he means to convey is that Israel has tried to introduce factors he, Asad, cannot brook because they run counter to ideological principles to which he is committed. Negotiators must understand and take these commitments into account even while they are applying pressure on Syria.

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[17] See for example, "al-Khatar al-Dahim" (The terrible danger), *Tishrin*, January 14, 1991, p. 1, and "al-Kabus al-Saddami Yukhayyimu al-'Iraq" (Saddam's horror is all over Iraq), *al-Thawra* (Damascus), January 18, 1991, p. 1.

[18] "Nuss al-Kalima al-Tarikhiyya alazi alqaha al-Qa'id al-Asad" (The full text of the historical speech delivered by the leader, Hafiz al-Asad), *al-Bath*, September 11, 1994, p. 2.

Fourth, in conjunction with a recognition of Ba'thism's limitations, negotiators must also understand Asad's need for maintaining an aspect of honor and legitimacy. They must make every effort to help him to devise a cover of legitimacy encompassing his actions that will allow him to bring himself, and the Syrian public, to stretch the limits of ideological commitment. The importance of honor—whether Asad's own or that of his country—must be kept in mind constantly.

Fifth, and in a similar vein, negotiators must acknowledge that Asad does not make decisions in a vacuum. He must have the full support of the various elements of Syrian society, or at least be able to win their support, before he can cross any of his preestablished red lines. To be assured of that support, Asad relies on each of the individuals and groups mentioned in earlier chapters—a factor that negotiators must not ignore. In some respects other people are but partners to a decision-making process that is concentrated in the hands of the president. Nevertheless, the support these partners give Asad, and the very fact of their being an attentive and sympathetic audience, or interlocutors who together face the dilemmas confronting the regime, is an essential component in Asad's process of making decisions. Thus it is important for Western policymakers to try to mobilize support within Syria—not only among the public but also among the various echelons of the leadership—to motivate Asad to move forward on the path desired by those in the West.

Sixth, negotiators must recognize Asad's reluctance to come forward with new or alternative options. This reluctance is both a matter of his personal approach and of the lack of a suitable staff to prepare options for him. It is therefore up to the opposite side to submit options and come out with new initiatives. The course of the negotiations must be used, as it were, to add to Asad's political education. His scant knowledge of Western political culture must be complemented by thorough and reasoned explanations of certain of its facets: the workings of democracy; the decision-making method imposed by it on Western or Israeli leaders, or the need for open diplomacy stemming from it.

Finally, negotiators should make note of the intonation—if one may call it that—of statements by Syria's spokespersons and of comments in the country's media: The tone of these comments often reveals Syrian attitudes and aims and may often presage changes in both. Carefully listened to and correctly interpreted, media reports and statements provide a first-rate tool for the foreign interlocutor to assess the ups and downs and twists and turns that habitually accompany any negotiations.

To sum up, therefore, it appears that for all the difficulties involved, negotiations with Asad can bring results. They require patience, fortitude, and consideration for the constraints at work on his side. And they require a demonstration of political strength powerful enough to make him feel that opposing it might leave him with his back to the wall. This mixture has worked in the past; it is likely to do so again.

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