Syria
Buying Time

Robert Rabil

For the United States, Syria has long represented something of a conundrum. Historically, Washington has preferred to maintain diplomatic relations with Damascus, in spite of Syria's prominent role as a repeat offender on the State Department's "terrorism list." But with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ensuing insurgency there, Syria has taken on a new and ominous role as an enabler of anti-Coalition insurgents and a source of regional instability.

So far, however, Washington has failed to formulate a coherent strategy toward Damascus. Central to this shortcoming is a lack of understanding about Syria's socio-political dynamics—and the nature of regional politics themselves. Yet such an analysis is crucial, because in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the regime of Bashar al-Assad has undergone a profound foreign policy transformation.

Internally, the regime has accelerated the process of "Assadization," suppressing dissent and shifting even greater power to the country's Alawite minority. It also has deepened its cooperation with Iran in an effort to solidify its most important strategic alliance. Most of all, however, Damascus is attempting to reassert its regional significance, especially in Lebanon, and in the process prevent the United States from forging a new, democratic regional order.



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Tension and ambivalence

Throughout most of their modern history, Washington and Damascus have had an uneasy relationship—one that, though marked by tension and apprehension, has rarely been confrontational. From 1946 to 1979, ties between the two countries were dictated by the geopolitics of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Cold War. And, although Syria moved headlong into the Soviet camp, the United States, believing in Syria's ability to influence events beyond its borders, maintained diplomatic relations with Damascus that were based above all on *realpolitik*. Washington, for example, mediated a disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and subsequently supported the entry of Syrian troops into Lebanon in 1976.

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But Syria's complicity in terrorism, which landed the country on the U.S. State Department's terrorist list beginning in 1979, emerged as a source of friction with the United States between 1979 and 2000. Even at the height of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (1991-2000), which helped thaw U.S.-Syrian relations, Washington's attitude toward Damascus remained unclear. Syria's participation in the U.S.-led anti-Iraq coalition during the first Gulf War was certainly appreciated, but not enough to exclude Damascus from Washington's official blacklist of countries supporting terrorism. The State Department's 1994, 1995, 1996, and 1997 annual reports on terrorism, for example, found Syria innocent of the charge of terrorism, but nevertheless an accomplice to it.[1]

The advent of the War on Terror fundamentally altered the dynamics of the U.S.-Syrian relationship. Although initially ambivalent, Washington could no longer condone Syrian support for—or harboring of—terrorist organizations. Syria's initial assistance in the fight against al-Qaeda, which helped to foil terrorist attacks on U.S. targets in Ottawa and Bahrain, was outweighed by its persistent role as a terrorist enabler. Despite several requests, including one delivered in person by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell in May 2003, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad continued to allow a bevy of terrorist organizations, among them the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Hamas, to operate in Damascus.

Against this backdrop, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq sent shockwaves through Syria. It shattered the regional status quo around which the Syrian regime had built its reputation as the vanguard of Arab nationalism, and upended the security regime underpinning the authoritarian rule of the Ba'ath governments in the Gulf and Levant. Perhaps even more threatening was the Bush administration's concurrent initiative to spread democracy in the greater Middle East, which presented a threat to the very nature of the regime in Damascus. The results were dramatic; quite suddenly, the regional order onto which Syria historically had projected its power—and from which it drew its legitimacy as a nationalist state—had collapsed. As seen from Damascus, nothing less than regime survival was at stake.

Assad's survival strategy

The resulting approach adopted by the Assad regime has been essentially two-pronged. The first component involves turning a blind eye to *jihadi* infiltration into Iraq as a way of undermining U.S. efforts there. In the process, Syrian authorities have indirectly transformed what was once a disordered infiltration into an organized operation. Growing conservatism in Syria, coupled with lax governmental rules (such as no entry visa requirements for Arabs), has created a political climate that is conducive to insurgent activities. This trend, moreover, has been perpetuated by Syria's minority Alawite regime, which, in order to atone for its brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, has embraced moderate Islam.[2]

The second is a deepening state of domestic repression in response to re-energized civil calls for political and economic reform. Before and upon his assumption of power in 2000, President Assad had pledged to introduce change into Syria's sclerotic political system. But as the so-called "Damascus Spring" began to spread, the regime backtracked on those promises. Under the pretext of the Arab-Israeli conflict and "national security," the regime has continued to harass, detain and allegedly liquidate reformers and/or dissidents.

At the same time, the Syrian regime has set about accelerating the consolidation of its rule. Since his assumption of power, President Assad has been trying to replace members of the old regime and officials whose loyalty is uncertain. This trend reached a crescendo during the Ba'ath Party's Tenth Regional Congress in June 2005, when nearly the entire "old guard" of the regime was forced into retirement.[3] Simultaneously, the membership of the Ba'ath Party's Regional Command Council, which wields significant power, was reduced from 21 to 14.[4] These steps were followed just weeks later by important changes to the leadership structure of the Syrian security forces.[5] Significantly, almost all of these changes localized power to Alawites close to the President, thereby narrowing the regime's base of political support.

The Congress served another crucial function as well: to reaffirm the dominant role of the Ba'ath party in Syrian politics. In his speech before the Congress, Assad asserted that the "role of the Ba'ath will remain essential."[6] Reformers were deeply disappointed by the outcome; they had believed that the regime, subjected to mounting international pressure, would introduce some reform to bring about national unity. But the Ba'ath Congress was a show of solidarity directed at the opposition, and the West. Its underlying message, in the words of one Syrian analyst, was that the Ba'ath was here to stay.[7]

Opening a new front

When the United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003, the Syrian regime did more than simply denounce the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Fearful of the impact of an American presence next door on its own internal stability, and wary of the possibility of military action migrating across the Iraqi-Syrian border, the Assad regime launched a concerted—and ongoing—effort to first support Iraq's army and subsequently fuel the insurgency that has emerged in the former Ba'athist state. As Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara told the Syrian parliament on March 30, 2003, "Syria has a national inter-

est in the expulsion of the invaders from Iraq."[8]

This strategy took on a number of forms. The Syrian regime mobilized Muslim public opinion in an effort to encourage *jihadi* infiltration into Iraq. It did so by creating religious sanction for instability in Iraq, with Syria's senior cleric, Grand Mufti Ahmad Kaftaro, issuing a fatwa (religious edict) calling on Muslims "to use whatever means possible to defeat the [U.S.] aggression including suicide bombings against the Zionist Americans and British invaders."[9] Indeed, the Syrian regime made good on its policy by providing the Iraqi regime with military equipment including night-vision goggles and allowing *jihadis* to cross the border into Iraq to kill Americans.

Testifying before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia of the House International Relations Committee, John Bolton, then the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, stated:

> We have seen Syria take a series of hostile actions toward Coalition forces in Iraq. Syria allowed military equipment to flow into Iraq on the eve of and during the war. Syria permitted volunteers to pass into Iraq to attack and kill our service members during the war, and is still doing so.[10]

This dual policy—mobilizing Muslim public opinion while turning a blind eye to *jihadi* infiltration—was speedily capitalized upon by extremists throughout the Muslim world. A broad network of Sunni mosques emerged as the hub for organizing this infiltration, encompassing "almost every village and town from Damascus to Baghdad."[11] Efforts by American troops to stop cross-border infiltration resulted in clashes with Syrian forces. Under intense pressure from the U.S., the Syrian regime did take certain measures, such as increasing the number of troops in border towns, to monitor and prevent the ongoing infiltration. But reports of training camps and Syrian intelligence officials aiding insurgents cast doubt upon Syria's true intentions.[12]

Syria's unhelpful role has also ratcheted up tensions between Damascus and Baghdad. In mid-2005, Iraq's defense minister, Saadoun al-Dulaimi, criticized Damascus for ignoring Iraqi demands "to stop the infiltration of terrorists" and warned that "when the lava of the exploding volcano of Iraq overflows, it will first hit Damascus."[13] Al-Dulaimi's criticisms were well-placed; Syria's support of the insurgency, both direct and indirect, has greatly undermined the security environment in Iraq.

At the same time, the Syrian regime—once a staunch opponent of religious radicalism—has embraced an array of regional Islamists. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas operate freely in Damascus, inflaming Palestinian public opinion against the U.S. and Israel and allegedly masterminding suicide bombings in Israel.[14] The Syrian regime has also expanded its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon; in addition to supplying the Shi'ite militia with arms, Syria has served as a key conduit for transferring missiles from Iran to the Islamist party.

The turn to Tehran

Deprived of its strategic depth in Iraq and its historic and geo-strategic backyard in Lebanon, Syria has also moved headlong into the Iranian camp. In February 2004, the two countries signed a key "memorandum of understanding" outlining an

expansion of bilateral defense cooperation—and codifying an Iranian commitment to protect Syria in case of attack by either Israel or the United States.[15] This partnership was further bolstered by the visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Syria in January 2005. The summit served to coordinate Syrian and Iranian policy and consolidate their alliance; Damascus backed Iran in its confrontation with the West over its nuclear program and both countries supported Hezbollah and Hamas in their resistance to Israeli occupation.[16] This alliance culminated in a defense treaty signed between the two countries in June 2006. Commenting on the treaty, Syrian Defense Minister Hasan Turkmani explained that "we [Syria and Iran] form a mutual front against Israeli threats." He asserted that "Iran considers Syria's security as Iran's security."[17] Since then, cooperation between Damascus and Tehran has increased, with both countries stressing the need for a joint approach to the American and Israeli threat.[18]

The reasons for Syria's interest in this alliance are clear. Both countries share concern over being targeted by the United States as part of the War on Terror, as well as a common belief that they must prevent the U.S. from creating a new, democratic regional order. In addition, Damascus sees partnership with Tehran as a necessary deterrent against the U.S. and Israel.

But whereas the Syrian regime is fighting for its survival, Iran is angling for regional hegemony. Cognizant of the current disarray in pan-Arab politics, Iran has begun to champion Arab causes, thereby forcing Arabs to toe its political line. No Arab leader has spoken as forcefully as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad against Israel and for Palestinians, especially Hamas.

Damascus is the lynchpin in these plans. Because of its strategic location, Syria has the ability to extend Iran's reach into the Levant, as well as to serve as a foil to advance Iranian regional ambitions under the pretext of Arab nationalist causes. But Syria is also unquestionably the junior partner in this alliance. As Syrian troops left Lebanon, Damascus lost important leverage vis-à-vis Hezbollah and Palestinian groups there. As a result, Syria can no longer dictate its policies to these groups without making considerable concessions. In the words of former Syrian Vice-President (and current vocal regime opponent) Abdel Halim Khaddam: "Bashar Assad is not a strategic ally of Iran, but only a strategic tool."[19]

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Syria versus the "Cedar Revolution"

Lebanon has long occupied a central role in Syria's strategic calculus, serving as a patronage system for Syria's Alawite security chiefs and a proxy front against Israel. Over time, however, this situation became precarious as many Lebanese, encouraged by the collapse of the regional order, began efforts to reclaim their country from Syrian occupation. This represented a serious threat to

Syria. Since their entry into Lebanon in 1976, the Syrians, pursuing a divide-and-conquer strategy among the country's diverse Christian and Muslim denominations, had been able to impose their hegemony over most of Lebanon. The country was brought under complete Syrian control when Syria joined the U.S.-led anti-Iraq coalition in 1990-1991 and Washington returned the favor by giving Damascus the green light to attack the last bastion of Christian resistance to Syrian hegemony. Throughout the 1990s, as the peace process became the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, Damascus increased its support of the Islamist party, Hezbollah, enabling it to become an effective instrument to pressure Israel while at the same time relegating the Lebanese authorities to a supporting role. Hezbollah, in turn, capitalized on these developments, legitimizing itself as both a political party and a resistance movement in the eyes of many Lebanese.

The departure of Syrian forces from Lebanon has beeen succeeded by a cycle of violence, now over a year old, aimed at anti-Syrian politicians and journalists and showcasing a clear message: only Syria can prevent Lebanon from descending into chaos.

The dynamics of the Israeli-Lebanese-Syrian relationship changed dramatically with Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. Israel's redeployment, which was carried out without first concluding a peace treaty with Syria, prompted immediate Lebanese calls for a similar Syrian withdrawal. After all, observers charged, Syrian troops were no longer needed to defend Beirut against Israeli aggression—something Syrian authorities had continuously trumpeted to legitimize their occupation.

Syria, in response, tried to further entrench itself in Lebanon. Its tool of choice? A pro-Syrian government that would be committed to stemming the rising tide of anti-Syrian political activities. Damascus directed its loyalists in Lebanon's parliament to extend for three years the term of its ally, President Emile Lahoud. But Syria's blatant meddling in Lebanese affairs caused a backlash, with former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and Druze leader Walid Jumblaat realigning their loyalties in the direction of anti-Syrian forces, thereby potentially threatening the very nature of the country's fragile Syrian-imposed order. External pressure was mounting as well, with the United States and France co-sponsoring UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004 calling for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah.

In an attempt to nip this growing anti-Syrian campaign in the bud, the Syrian regime—in tandem with its underlings in Lebanon's security apparatus—is believed to have orchestrated the assassination of Hariri in February 2005. But this act backfired spectacularly, triggering a mass uprising intent on reclaiming an independent democratic Lebanon. On March 14, 2005, approximately 1.5 million Lebanese (over a third of the country's entire population), took to the streets to demonstrate for Syria's withdrawal.[20]

Buffeted by international pressure and stunned by this sudden "Cedar Revolution," Syrian troops humiliatingly evacuated Lebanon the

following month. But their departure has been succeeded by a cycle of violence, now over a year old, aimed at anti-Syrian politicians and journalists and showcasing a clear message: only Syria can prevent Lebanon from descending into chaos.

Hunkering down

Syria, in short, is acting from a sense of siege. The scope and breadth of domestic repression—coupled with the regime's subversive activities in Lebanon, Iraq and even Jordan, only serve to highlight the fact that Damascus remains governed by a criminal mind-set and ruled by the language of force.[21] And, although it is emerging as a weak link in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis, Syria has the ability to play an essential role in it—extending this dangerous partnership to Palestinian radicals and other extremist forces in the region.

For the United States, these internal perceptions of weakness are likely to have concrete consequences. Humiliated in Lebanon and beleaguered by both internal and external threats, the Syrian regime is likely to find sanctuary in a continuation of its role as regional spoiler. Time and again, Syria has embraced terrorism as a strategic tool to counteract perceptions of its regional insignificance, and the conditions are ripe for it to do so again.



1. See the U.S. Department of State's *Patterns of Global Terrorism* for 1994 through 1997, available online at http://www.state.gov.
2. The regime has supported the building of some 80,000 mosques, over 22 higher-education institutions for teaching Islam, and many *Shari'a* (Islamic Law) schools. See Ibrahim Hamidi, "Dimashq Ta'lun 'an Khalaya Takfiriyah wa Da'awat ela Juhud Tanwiriyah… Suria al-'Ulmaniyah Tazdad Islamiyah" [Damascus Reports on Infidel (unbelief) Cells and Calls for Awareness Efforts… Secular Syria Grows Islamic], *Al-Hayat* (London), June 18, 2005. See also *Al-Hayat* (London), March 30 and May 3, 2006.
3. Among those retired as part of the reshuffle were Vice-Presidents Abdel Halim Khaddam and Muhammad Zuheir Mashariqa, former Prime Minister Muhammad Mustafa Miro, former Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas, and former Speaker of Parliament Abd al-Qader Qaddura.
4. Ziad Haydar, "Mu'tamar al-Ba'ath: Tawsiat Islahiyah Lam Takruq Saqf al-Tawaqu'at" [Ba'ath Summit: Recommendations of Reform That Did Not Pierce the Ceiling of Expectations], *As-Safir* (Beirut), June 10, 2005.
5. For example, Bashar's brother-in-law, Brigadier General Asef Shawkat, heads the regime's Military Intelligence, while his brother, Maher, is the commander of the Republican Guards. As well, Brigadier General Fouad Nassif, a close family friend, directs internal security in the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate. For more details, see Robert G. Rabil, *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 192-193.
6. "President Bashar al-Assad's Speech to the Tenth Regional Congress of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party," SANA (Damascus), June 6, 2005.
7. Sami Moubayed, "Bashar Assad Ensured the Baath Was Here to Stay," *Daily Star* (Beirut), July 18, 2005.
8. Alfred B. Prados, *Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues* (Washington: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, October 10, 2003), 6.
9. "Hal Qararat Suria an Tu'aser 'ala al-Ahdath fi al-Iraq?" [Has Syria Decided to Influence Events in Iraq?], *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (London), March 29/30, 2003.
10. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John R. Bolton, Statement before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, September 16, 2003, http://www.state.gov/t/us/rm/24135.htm.
11. John Burns, "Iraq's Ho Chi Minh Trail," *New York Times*, June 5, 2005.
12. Tom Masland, "Syria: Jihad without Borders," *Newsweek International*, November 8, 2005.
13. As cited in "Attack on Iraqi Workers Kills 12," cnn.com, July 26, 2005, http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/07/26/

iraq.main/.

14. For example, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Syria was reportedly behind a suicide attack in Haifa in 2003. See J. W. Anderson, "Israeli Airstrike Hits Site in Syria," *Washington Post*, October 6, 2003. Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal has been vocal in supporting the party's armed resistance against Israel. See "Mashaal Yad'ou ela Da'm Hamas bil-Silah wal-Rijal" [Mashaal Calls for Supporting Hamas in Arms and Men], *As-Safir* (Beirut), April 11, 2006.
15. "Defence Minister Says Syria a Part of Iran's Security," IRNA (Tehran), February 26, 2004.
16. "Syria and Iran Back Each Other Against All Comers," *Daily Star* (Beirut), January 20, 2006.
17. "Tehran wa Dimashq Tuwaqi'an Itifaqan Askarian" [Tehran and Syria Sign a Defense Treaty], *As-Safir* (Beirut), June 16, 2006.
18. Ibid.
19. Abdel Halim Khaddam, interview with United Press International (Arabic), as transcribed by *Al-Mustqbal* (Beirut), June 5, 2006.
20. The March 14th demonstration was also in part a response to an earlier, pro-Syrian march organized by Hezbollah. Approximately half a million people participated in that rally.
21. In addition to supporting and upgrading its relationship with Hamas against the wishes of the international community, Damascus has been accused of training and arming Hamas members. Jordanian authorities arrested twenty Hamas members in May 2006, who, according to Jordanian authorities, were planning to carry out terror attacks in the Hashemite Kingdom. Under interrogation, they revealed that they had been trained and armed in Syria. See Muhammad al-Da'meh, "Al-Mushtabah Fihum Biqadiat 'Hamas' fi al-Urdun Ya'tarifun Bitalqihum Tadribat fi Suria" [Those Suspects in the 'Hamas' Case in Jordan Confess That They Received Training in Syria], *As-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), May 12, 2006; and "Al-Urdun Ya'rud I'tirafat Nashiti Hamas" [Jordan Displays the Confessions of Hamas Activists], *As-Safir* (Beirut), May 12, 2006.