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BASHAR'S GAME: WHAT IS SYRIA UP TO?

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Even those who long ago abandoned any expectations of a fundamental transformation in Syrian policy under Bashar al-Assad have nevertheless been surprised by Assad's approach to the war in Iraq. For many, this posture seems to invite a direct confrontation with the United States of the sort that his father, Hafez al-Assad, would never have risked.

Indeed, Bashar has consciously chosen to come out against the Anglo-American war on Iraq and even sought to lead the Arab camp opposed to the United States. In an interview in the Lebanese daily al-Safir a few days after the beginning of the war, Bashar insisted that the war is part of larger and more sinister American plan to redraw the map of the Middle East in the service of Israeli interests. He added that Syria was liable to be the next American target in the region but that it would not stand idly by. He also stressed that as long as Israel exists, it constitutes a threat to Syria and to all the Arabs.

It is therefore not surprising that Syrian media have recently become a platform for vicious anti-American propaganda, unrestrained attacks on America's "evil and Satanic offensive," and adulation for "the brave and admirable resistance" of the Iraqi people. The "Syrian

street" has added its voice with a series of huge demonstrations in support of Iraq and against the American campaign. Nevertheless, none of this is nearly as significant as the matter of Bashar's willingness to assist the Iraqi war effort, which emerged with great fanfare several days after the outbreak of hostilities. That happened when senior American officials, especially Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, accused Damascus of aiding Iraq in a way that could endanger American forces. According to Rumsfeld, the Syrians transferred or allowed the use of their territory to transfer military equipment, including night vision goggles, to Iraq. According to reports from Israel, Syrian had also permitted the Iraqis to conceal military equipment in Syria, including even proscribed materials such as unconventional weapons or surface-to-surface missiles. The Syrians, of course, quickly denied such charges, dismissing them as Zionist propaganda aimed at driving a wedge between Syria and the United States or, alternatively, as an American attempt to prepare the ground for a possible American assault on Syria.

All this raises some obvious questions about Bashar's behavior. Is he aware of the possible consequences of his actions and is he not

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concerned that his policies might put Syria on a collision course with the United States? Does he not have a true grasp of the situation because of unreliable information or faulty judgment? And, finally, is he really in charge?

While there are no unequivocal answers to these questions, it is worth recalling that there is nothing new in Bashar's behavior. Ever since he took power following his father's death, Syrian policy with respect to Iraq has constantly edged close to the threshold of American tolerance, though without ever actually crossing it. For many months, Syria has pushed for warmer relations with Iraq and aligned itself with Iraq in the latter's political struggle with Washington. In return, Syria has received 150,000-200,000 barrels of Iraqi oil per day, in clear contravention of the sanctions on Iraq. Finally, there are persistent reports that Syria has ignored the use of its territory to smuggle weapons into Iraq.

Syria's current posture is therefore fully consistent with its pre-war policies, and any change in the rules of the game has come from the American side. After all, for several months before the start of the war, Washington had turned a blind eye to Bashar's actions or, at worst, lodged some mild verbal protests. Only after the fighting began did it choose to rebuke Bashar for acting in ways that had previously been overlooked.

Still, it is worthwhile trying to assess Bashar's motives in adopting such a blatantly provocative posture. In the first place, there is no doubt that Bashar is acting under pressure. He senses that Syria could become a target of future American wrath once the war in Iraq is over. Moreover, he is acting out of anti-American instinct unmitigated by calculations of strategic interest that might argue in favor of a more cautious approach. Secondly, Bashar is determined to strengthen his standing in the Syrian street and, by extension, the Arab street, and he is therefore

prepared to adopt a populist stance rather than act contrary to prevailing moods. That may well suggest a lack of political maturity, self-confidence and experience in a leader who has not yet reached forty years of age.

That raises questions about where all this might lead. There are many indications that Washington and Damascus may be on a collision course. However, it is possible that Secretary Rumsfeld does not represent the dominant trend in the Administration but only the hawkish school of thought that believes that Syria ought to be a future target of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Secretary of State Colin Powell, for example, has been far less aggressive in referring to Syria. Indeed, he insists that Damascus can choose which path it wants to pursue, i.e., that all the options are still open.

In the past, Washington adopted an accommodating approach to Damascus precisely because the Syrians themselves refrained from crossing any "red lines." Every time their actions seemed about to provoke some American reaction, they pulled back. In Bashar's own view, he has not yet crossed such a line but has only persisted, since the outbreak of war, in doing what he had been doing for many months before. It is therefore likely that, having provoked a signal of serious American concern, he will now display more caution. That, in any event, is what his father would have done.

It is American indulgence that encouraged a show of Syrian defiance. That defiance may well pay off for Bashar if it enhances his popular standing in Syria and elsewhere while preserving the possibility of a future reconciliation with Washington if the peace process in the region is resumed after the war. But for that possibility to materialize, George W. Bush, Jr., must also follow in his father's footsteps. If he does not, Bashar may pay a heavy price.