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May 5, 2003

**POWELL IN DAMASCUS:
WILL POLICY CHANGE IN SYRIA FOLLOW REGIME CHANGE IN IRAQ?**

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At one point during the height of the Cold War, Yemen simultaneously hosted military aid missions from the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Since then, no other country has matched Yemen's diplomatic dexterity, but Syria has come close. Its major accomplishment under President Hafez al-Assad was to have itself placed on the U.S. State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism while simultaneously being courted by American Presidents and Secretaries of State in the hope that it would contribute to other projects ranging from the peace process through stability in Lebanon to coalition-building against Iraq.

In his recent visit to Damascus, Secretary of State Colin Powell served notice that the days of such latitude are over. In unusually blunt language, he told the Syrian leadership that there is "a new strategic situation" in the region to which Syria would be well advised to conform. In particular, Powell made it clear that he expected Syria to shut down the headquarters of what the United States defines as terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command. He also demanded an end to the transshipment of weapons and materiel to Hizbullah in Lebanon and urged the deployment of the Lebanese Army

to the southern border opposite Israel, where Hizbullah is now the only military presence. It is entirely possible that these demands prefigure future American pressure for the removal of Syrian forces from Lebanon.

During his visit, Powell did not even hint at the possibility of using force to back up his demands. Indeed, he explicitly refuted the belligerent declarations emanating from other quarters in Washington. But given the harsh tone previously employed by President Bush and the growing anti-Syria sentiment in Congress, symbolized by the move to pass the Syria Accountability Act first submitted for consideration in 1998 and then suspended at the request of the Clinton Administration, it will be difficult for Syria simply to finesse the issue, as it has done in the past. True, the initial Syrian response was to rebuff the American accusations. For example, Foreign Minister Farouk ash-Shar'a repeated the longstanding denials of any terrorist headquarters in Syria, insisting instead that these are simply information offices and that providing shelter to displaced Palestinians is not equivalent to supporting terrorism. Nevertheless, the U.S. Administration shows little sign of continuing to pretend that these are merely semantic differences. Whether or not the United States and Syria avoid a more serious confrontation

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

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therefore depends, to a greater degree than in the past, on the ability of the Syrian leadership to accommodate American concerns. And that depends on President Bashar al-Assad's ability to break with his pattern of behavior since he acceded to office following the death of his father in 2000.

When Bashar became President, many observers assumed that his western education and the experience of living abroad, together with his civilian background and lack of involvement in Ba'th Party or government affairs until the death of his older brother, would incline him to push for the liberalization of Syrian politics, economy and society and for some sort of reconciliation with the West. But after a few halting steps in the direction for reform, he retrenched domestically. And despite some cosmetic changes to Syria's military deployment in Lebanon, he retained Syria's grip on that country and actually allowed Hizbullah to operate with even fewer constraints than those imposed by his father in his last years. American spokesmen do acknowledge that Syria has shown some cooperation in the campaign against al-Qaeda since September 11, almost certainly because the regime's own confrontation with Islamist radicals stretching back over twenty years makes this a matter of mutual interest. But apart from that, expectations of change under Bashar in either domestic or foreign policy have gone largely unfulfilled.

Analysts unwilling to admit that they had misjudged him attribute these developments to his youth, inexperience, lack of self-confidence, and continued reliance on the "old guard" of advisers who had surrounded his father. To the extent that these explanations are valid, Bashar's capacity to respond to the American challenge will increase as he becomes progressively less youthful, inexperienced, and lacking in self-confidence. But to culminate in real change, his maturation will have to be accompanied by other changes in the coterie around him. For the time

being, the representatives of "old thinking" remain firmly ensconced in influential positions. For example, Foreign Minister ash-Shar'a, interviewed on the CBS program "60 Minutes" while Powell was in Damascus, claimed that the U.S. had gone to war in Iraq in order to get lucrative post-war reconstruction contracts, that Syria is misunderstood in the United States because of Israel, and that Syria is already a democracy, as evidenced by the last presidential election.

With senior advisers like ash-Shar'a still in place, it will be difficult for Assad to show any of the real flexibility needed to respond to the American challenge, as distinct from the tactical games (e.g., temporary closures or relocations of terrorist offices) that Syria has employed in the past to deflect expressions of American displeasure. In any case, the regime's instinctive response is to resist serious liberalization of domestic or foreign policy, lest that stimulate a process of incremental regime change. Under ordinary circumstances, even "aggressive engagement" by the United States, unless backed by a plausible threat of military intervention, would be insufficient to provoke the kind of Syrian *glasnost* and *perestroika* at home or abroad that might expose the regime to the same fate suffered by Mikhail Gorbachev.

If there is any major impetus for change, it is a broader international consensus that constrains even more the regime's room for maneuver. A possible hint in this direction has come from the French Foreign Ministry. On the eve of Powell's departure for Damascus, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin openly called for the speedy restoration of Lebanese independence in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 520 and for further Syrian troop withdrawals from Lebanon and modernization and reform efforts at home. That may signal a change in the "strategic situation" that goes beyond even what Powell had in mind and what Assad can ignore.