Syria at a Crossroads

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The Ba'ath regime's primary concern is its own survival. After nearly forty years of rule by the Asad dynasty, it does not face any serious domestic threats, but it is fully aware of the underlying instability of a regime dominated by members of a minority community. Bashar al-Asad, who succeeded his father in June 2000 as Syria's president, is more sure-footed and in firmer control than he was a few years ago, but both his persona and the full scope of his ability remain enigmatic to Syrian and foreign observers alike.

Syria's strategic position underwent profound changes over the past two decades. It lost its international patron when the Soviet Union collapsed, and the effort to build an alternative relationship with the US has thus far failed. In 1979, a strategic alliance was formed between Syria and Iran that in recent years has become Syria's most important foreign relation. Within this relationship, the balance has shifted under Bashar al-Asad's rule, as a partnership of equals now seems more like a patron-client relationship. Yet straddling the line has been a hallmark of Syrian policy under the Asads, and Syria has tried to signal that it is not squarely within the Iranian camp. Other Arab countries, however, have not been so persuaded, and Syria's relationship with much of the Arab world has been strained.

In 1991, a Syrian-Israeli peace process began at the Madrid Conference. It has unfolded through several phases, but has not produced an agreement. Over seventeen years (1991-2008), Syria and Israel have negotiated with and confronted one other, and their relationship in the aftermath of nearly

two years of Turkish mediation could develop along either track: transition to direct negotiation or renewed and perhaps exacerbated conflict.

Against this backdrop, Syria's relationship with a few of its neighbors should be examined.

Israel. Bashar al-Asad is determined to regain the Golan Heights lost by his father (as minister of defense) in 1967. He prefers to do so through diplomacy and is willing to sign a peace treaty with Israel to that end. But should a diplomatic option fail, he is committed to resort to war and has indeed made a major investment equipping and rebuilding Syria's armed forces. He also continues the policy of keeping the pressure on Israel by proxy – Hizbollah in Lebanon and the rejectionist Palestinian organizations.

In recent years a paradigm shift in the contours of an Israeli-Syrian peace deal, sketched during the negotiations of the 1990s, has taken place. Israel is now less interested in a deal based on "the Golan for a peace treaty," rather "the Golan for a peace treaty and a strategic realignment" (namely, Syria's distancing from Iran, Hizbollah, and the rejectionist organizations). This may also be the position of the Obama administration. In that case, a renewal of the Israel-Syria negotiation and a US-Syria dialogue in 2009 would entail a real testing of Syria's willingness to go through a Sadat-like reorientation of policies in order to build a new relationship with Washington and regain the Golan Heights.

In September 2007 the world learned that in order to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel, Bashar al-Asad was willing to go as far as build a nuclear reactor with North Korean help. The site was destroyed by the Israel Air Force. Asad displayed self control and has thus far not retaliated, but the episode demonstrated the lethal potential inherent in the Israeli-Syrian conflict.

Lebanon. Consolidation and maintenance of Syria's hegemony in Lebanon since the late 1970s has been a major Syrian strategic asset. Syria sees Lebanon as part of (a virtual) Greater Syria, as part of its zone of influence, as an area crucial to its own defense, and as a staging area for pressuring Israel. Their common interests in Lebanon are a major component of Syria's alliance with Iran, and Hizbollah and its arsenal are a crucial dimension of Syria's defensive and offensive posture vis-à-vis Israel. In 2005, following

the assassination of former prime minister Hariri, Syria was forced to withdraw its military forces from Lebanon, but it has retained direct and indirect influence across the border. In addition, under Bashar al-Asad Syria's relationship with Hizbollah gradually evolved from a patron-client relationship to a strategic partnership.

Turkey. After decades of hostility Syria now enjoys a comfortable relationship with Turkey. The Kurdish underground was removed from Syria by Hafez al-Asad and Syria seems to have all but accepted Turkey's annexation of Alexandrette. On the Turkish side, an Islamic government unhappy with its relationship with Europe and the US is becoming more of a Middle Eastern power. Turkey has clearly enjoyed its ability to serve as a mediator between Israel and Syria.

Iraq. Bashar al-Asad did not want the US to invade Iraq, and once it did, did not want the US to be successful, retain a military presence, or enjoy political primacy east of his border. For a regime haunted by a siege mentality, the notion of being sandwiched between the US and Israel was unacceptable. Syria was sufficiently pitted against the Bush administration's Iraq policy so that the Damascus airport and Syria's border with Iraq became crucial links in the supply chain to the Sunni insurrection in Iraq. This was one of the major reasons for the animosity developed by George W. Bush towards Bashar al-Asad and his regime. Syria remains intensely interested in the course of events in Iraq, will monitor them closely, and will seek to influence them as the US seeks an honorable exit under the Obama administration.

Jordan. During the past few decades Syria's relationship with Jordan has gone through steep ups and downs, but as a rule tended to be negative. Currently it can be described as indifferent. Syria and Jordan belong to the two rival camps in the Middle East, but there is no active hostility between them.

The Palestinians. When Hafez al-Asad transformed Syria from a weak, semi-passive state to a powerful ambitious regional player, he came to view Syria's weaker Arab neighbors in the Levant – Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians – as clients. Syria's efforts to bring the Palestinian national movement under its wing failed and it had to settle for the lesser role of

patron of the rejectionist Palestinian organizations. Typical of a country straddling the line, Syria in the 1990s was at once a participant in the Madrid process and a critic of Arafat's policy of pursuing the same course.

Currently, Syria continues to host the radical Palestinian organizations, supports and exerts influence over Hamas, and is critical of Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority for collaborating with the US and with Israel. Yet given the prospect of fully rejoining the peace process under the Obama administration, Syria also views the Palestinian Authority as a competitor for primacy in such a peace process. Overall during the latter part of 2008, Bashar al-Asad and his regime did well in their foreign policy. The transition to a public indirect negotiation with Israel blunted the edge of the Bush administration's effort to isolate and de-legitimize Syria and its ruler. France under Sarkozy took full advantage of the opportunity in order to enhance its role in the Middle East at Washington's expense; he invited Bashar al-Asad to Paris and helped him conclude an association agreement with the EU. Syria made some concessions in order to reach the Doha agreement on Lebanon and agreed for the first time in sixty years to recognize Lebanon's legitimacy and sovereignty by establishing diplomatic relations with Beirut. In return for these concessions it obtained further relief from a serious investigation of the Hariri assassination and further tacit international acceptance of its dual role as a member of the Iranian dominated "axis of resistance" (*muqawama*) and a potential fixer of the damage inflicted by that axis.

2009 may well be a watershed year for Syria. Should the US dialogue with Iran develop successfully or should an Arab-Israeli peace process be revived with a Syrian-Israeli track at its center or at least as part of it, Syria may well embark on a road leading to a new relationship with Washington, settlement with Israel, and a secure place in the mainstream of international life. But it is equally possible that a different scenario will unfold with Syria remaining a cardinal member of the radical camp in the Middle East, engaged in violent confrontations in the Israeli, Iraqi, and Lebanese contexts. Finally, Syria might also continue to straddle the line and remain a member of the Iranian axis while signaling its desire to bail out of it.