

# Bashar al-Assad and Israel: Back to the Past?

Eyal Zisser

The coming end to the civil war in Syria and the victory for Bashar al-Assad raises the question of which Syrian president Israel will now face. The likely answer is that it will be the “old, familiar” Bashar, a ruler who sticks to the status quo, to what is tried and true, including – and perhaps especially – with respect to his approach toward Israel. This seemingly returns Israel to the point it was at with respect to Bashar before the outbreak of the war in Syria in the spring of 2011. Israel remains positioned against a defiant ruler who alongside his continued dependence on Russia, his most important patron and ally, works to strengthen relations with Iran and with Hezbollah, but who also exercises restraint and maintains quiet along the border and is even willing to engage in peace negotiations with Israel.

*Keywords:* Israel, Syria, Bashar al-Assad, Iran, Russia

The prevailing tendency in Israel is to ignore Bashar al-Assad and focus instead on Russia and Iran, which Jerusalem sees as “masters of the house” in Syria. Yet despite the decisive contribution of these two actors to Bashar’s success in the long civil war, this victory is first of all the victory of Bashar al-Assad the man, his regime, and even the Syrian state that he heads. In time, and as he returns to being a legitimate and accepted ruler in the regional and international arenas, his power will presumably increase – first and foremost, his political maneuvering and bargaining capabilities, both with respect to his rivals, and with respect to his patrons, Russia and Iran.<sup>1</sup>

On the question of which Bashar we can expect, the answer is the “old familiar” Bashar: the devil we know, a ruler who returns to the path he took

Prof. Eyal Zisser is the Vice Rector of Tel Aviv University and holds the Yona and Dina Ettinger Chair in Contemporary History of the Middle East.

and the policy that has guided him until today, including and especially with respect to his approach toward Israel. After all, Bashar's main conclusion from the war is that retaining the status quo, and in any case refraining from any action, not to mention initiative, is the key to his survival, while the attempt to pursue a new path of changes and modifications is what brought the civil war upon him.

For Israel, this return to the past is seemingly refreshing – a return to the years before the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, during which Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah tightened their strategic cooperation but Bashar maintained complete quiet along the border with Israel, and was even willing to engage in peace negotiations with Israel in order to regain the Golan Heights. Post-war Syria is a different country than the Syria of eight years ago. It is a devastated and destroyed state that lacks effective control over significant portions of its territory, and whose populations and demographics have changed over the years.<sup>2</sup> However, when it comes to Israel-Syria relations, it seems that the future does not herald any reversal or novelty.

### **Bashar's Syria, Approaching the End of the War**

At the end of eight years of battles, the civil war in Syria is nearing its end, with the victory of Bashar al-Assad and his patrons, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. In the summer of 2018, the campaign in the south of the country near the border with Israel ended in victory. On July 12, 2018, the Syrian regime regained full control over the city of Daraa, where the Syrian revolution broke out in March 2011. Two weeks later, on July 26, 2018, the Syrian flag – the flag of the Ba'ath regime – was also raised over the border crossing with Israel near Quneitra, which was taken by the rebels in the summer of 2014.<sup>3</sup> This site was reopened as a crossing for civilians and goods on October 15, 2018, under the supervision of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). The event came on the heels of the September 13, 2018 report that the IDF ended the activity of Operation Good Neighbor, which was responsible for the ties and aid to the civilian population in rebel-held territories on the Syrian side of the border in the Golan Heights.<sup>4</sup>

With the end of the war approaching, the expectation and even hope in Israel that the war in the neighboring country would continue for many more years disappeared. For Israel, the reality of the "strategic tie" in the killing fields of Syria, in which none of the opposing sides had the strength or the ability to overcome its adversaries, was something of a blessing.

This stalemate meant the continued rule of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus – strong enough to continue to maintain quiet along the border with Israel, but too weak to challenge or take action against Israel, let alone respond to its actions, such as the air attacks that Israel carried out in Syrian territory against Iran’s weapons deliveries to Hezbollah.<sup>5</sup>

The continued rule of Bashar in Damascus was seen by many in Israel as preferable to his overthrow, which could have led to the collapse of the Syrian state and the rise to power of radical Islamic groups. On the other hand, some in Israel called for the overthrow of Bashar due to his close relations with patrons and allies Iran and Hezbollah, which these Israelis saw as a greater strategic threat than the Islamic State and other radical Islamic groups.<sup>6</sup>

But official Israel refrained from defining its long term interests in Syria – the fall of Bashar or his survival as ruler – and let itself be influenced by events on the ground. Its policy thus smacked of a tactical response to the chaos that took hold in Syria and especially in the Golan Heights area, which on more than one occasion spilled over into Israeli territory. Israel established a buffer zone (although it refrained from calling it that) along the Israeli-Syrian border. It established relations with some of the rebel groups that were active on the Syrian side of the border in the Golan Heights, provided them with logistical and monetary assistance, and according to media reports even provided them with weapons. Alongside this, Israel exploited Bashar’s weakness and began operating within Syrian territory in an attempt to prevent the transfer of advanced weapons from Iran to Hezbollah, as well as to thwart Tehran’s attempt to advance the production of precision missiles in Syria and Lebanon.

From the moment the Russians arrived in Syria in September 2015 and began to fight alongside Bashar (and with them, the Iranians), the possibility, as theoretical as it was, of active Israeli involvement in the war in Syria was no longer on the table. Nonetheless, the recognition that the war in Syria was nearing its end did not lead to any change in Israel’s approach toward Bashar al-Assad. After all, in Israel and also in the West it was assumed that in light of the fact that the military victory in Syria’s battlefields was achieved thanks to the military involvement of Russia and Iran, it is these two countries that became the masters in Syria and will maintain influence and even control for many years. Therefore, Israel chose to ignore Bashar, the man and the

When it comes to Israel-Syria relations, it seems that the future does not herald any reversal or novelty.

regime, and to take action – militarily against Iran and politically vis-à-vis Russia – in an attempt to prevent the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force and Shiite militias that the Iranians created and brought to Syria from establishing themselves in Syria.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Bashar exercised restraint each time Israel attacked within his territory was seen in Jerusalem as an expression of weakness, and strengthened the sense that there is no need to include Bashar in policy calculations.<sup>8</sup>

However, the victory in the war in Syria is first of all the victory of Bashar al-Assad, the man and the regime that he heads, and only afterwards the victory of the allies that joined the war effort, supported him, and prevented his fall. Bashar has proven his personal strength, political acumen, and maneuvering capability – as an individual, and backed by the Alawite sect, the institutions of the regime and the state, foremost among them the armed forces and security forces, and in effect the same coalition of social forces that serve as the basis of the Ba’ath regime in Damascus.<sup>9</sup> Bashar did not survive the war in order to become a puppet or tool in the hands of others. Thus as time passes and Bashar regains legitimacy and acceptance in the international and regional arenas, his power may increase, and especially his ability to maneuver vis-à-vis his adversaries, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, but first and foremost vis-à-vis his allies and patrons who helped him achieve victory.

### **Bashar al-Assad and Israel: What Lies Ahead?**

As the war in Syria ends, the victory of Bashar raises the question of which Syrian president Israel will now face. Will it be the “good old” Bashar, familiar to Israel in the years before the outbreak of war in his country – a ruler who ties himself to the axis of resistance led by Iran and Hezbollah, defies Israel and the United States, but at the same time exercises restraint along the border and is even willing to negotiate a political agreement with Israel? Or will it be a new Bashar who thinks outside the box and is willing to adopt different and bolder methods of action than in the past regarding Syria’s internal as well as external behavior, and especially regarding Israel?

A key to understanding Bashar’s future path may be what lessons the Syrian President has learned from the war he weathered and barely survived. In addition, what are the implications of the war for the man, his path, and his conduct? The answer to these questions is complicated. It seems that the following can be said about Bashar of 2019:

First, he is a determined and confident ruler who has successfully passed a difficult personal test that only few believed he could survive. In addition, he is a cold, calculating, and ruthless individual whose hands are stained with the blood of his people, whom he did not hesitate to butcher or target with chemical weapons; in addition, he expelled hundreds of thousands and even millions from their homes. At the same time, he is a sober-minded ruler who knows the limits of force and knows how to play the game and stop at the edge of the abyss.

Second, he is a ruler who seemingly has nothing to lose, who is the head of a failed state lacking resources and infrastructure that in the past allowed Israel to maintain a “balance of terror” against it. Thus, the concern of more than a few Israelis that Bashar could adopt a tactic of limited conflict against Israel, for example renewing or enabling low intensity acts of terrorism along the border between the two countries, is understandable. The response to this, however, is that this is exactly the situation that existed between Israel and Syria in the summer of 2006 after the Second Lebanon War – then too Bashar felt that he was the victor and threatened Israel with resistance activities (*muqawama*) along the border in the Golan Heights. But in the moment of truth in September 2007, when Israel destroyed the nuclear reactor that the Syrian President sought to build in northern Syria, he refrained from responding and was even willing to enter peace negotiations with Israel.

At the same time, it seems that Bashar will focus on his survival – mainly on rebuilding his army rather than reconstructing his country’s economy or taking in the Syrian refugees who fled Syria and whom he would be happy to keep as expatriates. It is well known that Bashar sees the refugees as a blessing, since they helped lessen the economic burden that was created due to one of the highest natural population growth rates in the world, which was one of the causes of the revolution in Syria. In this respect, it is worth quoting from Bashar’s speech from August 2017: “We have lost the best of our sons in this war. The state’s economic infrastructure has been almost entirely destroyed. We have spent much money and the war has cost us blood and sweat. All

The victory in the war in Syria is first of all the victory of Bashar al-Assad, the man and the regime that he heads, and only afterwards the victory of the allies that joined the war effort, supported him, and prevented his fall. Bashar did not survive the war in order to become a puppet or tool in the hands of others.

this is true, but in return we have earned a healthier and more harmonious society in the true, rooted sense of the term harmony.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Bashar might focus his efforts on achieving the ultimate immunity for himself and his regime, i.e., nuclear weapons – as well as working to rebuild his capabilities in the field of missile systems and chemical weapons, which were depleted or destroyed during the war. After all, Saddam Hussein, who failed in his attempts to achieve such weapons after the nuclear reactor that he sought to build was destroyed by Israel in June 1981, was overthrown by the United States, as was the regime of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. The latter surrendered the nuclear option in the early 2000s as part of a deal with the West, but the regime was overthrown by insurgents who were helped by the West, the same West with which Qaddafi had reached an agreement only a decade earlier. In contrast, the regime in North Korea, which has nuclear capabilities, enjoys immunity. For his part, Bashar has retained chemical weapons, despite commitments to destroy them, and has not hesitated to make use of them again and again, and in addition maintains connections and military cooperation with North Korea.<sup>11</sup>

And finally, Bashar will no doubt continue to be suspicious of the West and especially of the United States and Israel, but will refrain from reaching a confrontation with them, although he will not necessarily let Israel continue to operate as it pleases in Syrian territory. In any case, he will show loyalty and commitment to his patron Vladimir Putin as well as to the long term strategic alliance with Iran. However, Bashar will aspire to regain his freedom of action and maneuverability vis-à-vis these patrons.

The Syrian regime’s relationship with Iran and Hezbollah has been forged in blood during the long years of fighting in Syria. Bashar is still in need of the military backing that Iran provides him in order to contend with and even deter internal and external enemies. Iran’s military presence on Syrian soil does not worry him, but at the same time, Bashar continues to act to prevent Iran from establishing religious and cultural influence, certainly among the members of his community, the Alawite sect. Despite Iran’s efforts to advance a process of Iranian-style “Shiitization” in Syria, there are no signs that it is succeeding in these efforts.<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, Bashar, like his father before him, never saw himself as in Iran’s pocket or obligated to follow it into a confrontation with Israel and spill Syrian blood for it. In view of the possible eruption of an Israeli-Iranian confrontation

in Syrian territory, he has even acted, with the help of Moscow, to distance Iran from the border with Israel.<sup>13</sup>

The Golan question: The end of the war with a victory for Bashar, along with the effort to reach a settlement in Syria, and especially to find a solution to the crisis regarding the refugees who have fled Syria, could open up the “Golan case,” which many in Israel tended to see during the long years of the war in Syria as “signed and sealed.” This could happen as part of the attempt of the international community to reach a deal that would regulate the reality in Syria and enable the state to stand on its own two feet in return for severing itself from Iran as well as repatriating the Syrian refugees.<sup>14</sup> But the concerns in Israel on this issue are premature, and certainly in light of President Trump’s announcement regarding United States recognition of Israel’s sovereignty in the Golan.<sup>15</sup> It is hard to believe that Bashar would lift a finger to advance steps toward peace with Israel, as opposed to a hesitant and cautious willingness to engage in diplomatic negotiation, mostly through intermediaries – exactly as he did throughout the first decade of his rule.

These questions are of enormous importance to Israel in light of issues that concern the future of Syria, first and foremost Israel’s expected campaign against Iran in order to prevent it from establishing itself on Syrian soil, but also regarding the question of Israel’s presence in the Golan. This question has perhaps been sharpened by President Trump’s decision to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which was rejected almost universally immediately thereafter by other international actors.

Despite Israel’s reluctance to take part in shaping the future of Syria, in practice it does play such a role, even if indirectly and in its ability to influence and promote or alternatively to sabotage or even stop the efforts to end the war in Syria and rebuild the country. Moscow is attempting to raise funds for reconstruction, exploiting the cracks in the wall of international opposition to Bashar and his regime.<sup>16</sup> The Arab world has already started accepting his return to Damascus, and in Europe too some are putting out feelers toward Bashar in the hope that he will agree to take back the refugees that have fled Syria. As for the United States, in December 2018 President Trump announced that he had ordered the withdrawal of

While the eight years that have passed since the war erupted have changed the face of Syria entirely, they have changed very little for Bashar al-Assad, and it seems that they have actually strengthened his commitment to the status quo and his reluctance to jump into the unknown.

American forces from Syria after the defeat of the Islamic State, which was the reason for the Americans' arrival in Syria in the first place.<sup>17</sup> With respect to all of these actors, Israel has the ability to maneuver and bargain, and it can influence their decisions and actions on the Syrian question.

## Conclusion

The end of the war in Syria with the triumph of Bashar al-Assad puts Israel in a situation where it faces a ruler who has survived the war that ravaged his country and emerged victorious, albeit thanks to the mobilization of Russia and Iran on his side, two countries that for now have influence and even control in Syria. While the eight years that have passed since the war erupted in Syria have changed the face of Syria entirely, they have changed very little for Bashar al-Assad, and it seems that they have actually strengthened his commitment to the status quo and even to the "tried and true," and in any case his reluctance to jump into the unknown.

Now that the war in his country has ended, Bashar will work to strengthen the foundations of his regime and Syrian society that have ensured his survival – first and foremost, the army and the security forces, and the members of the Alawite sect, along with the rest of the coalition at the basis of his regime. Bashar will maintain his connections with Russia and Iran, although he presumably does not see himself as a puppet ruler in the hands of these two countries.

With respect to Israel, Bashar will likely try to restore the balance between the two countries, but at the same time refrain from reaching a confrontation with Israel, certainly now that the war in his country has ended.<sup>18</sup> This returns Israel to the starting point vis-à-vis Bashar before the outbreak of the war in Syria in the spring of 2011 – a defiant ruler working to strengthen relations with Iran and Hezbollah, but who exercises restraint and quiet along the border and is even willing to engage in peace negotiations with Israel.

Thus, it is quite possible that the future of Israel-Syria relations will look like the past.

## Notes

- 1 Daniel L. Byman, "Can Syria Return to the Regional Stage?" Brookings Institution, February 28, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/02/28/can-syria-return-to-the-regional-stage/>.
- 2 "The Future of Syria: How a Victorious Bashar al-Assad is Changing Syria," *The Economist*, June 28, 2018, <https://econ.st/2DjXIXO>.



- 3 Liad Osmo, "The 'Symbol of the Revolution' is in Assad's Hands: The Syrian Flag is Raised in Daraa," *Ynet*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5308975,00.html>.
- 4 Yoav Zeitoun, "After Two Years: IDF Ends Humanitarian Aid to Syrians," *Ynet*, September 13, 2018, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5349571,00.html>.
- 5 See for example Shlomo Brom, Benedetta Berti, and Mark A. Heller, "Syria: The Civil War with No Winner," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2013-2014*, eds. Shlomo Brom and Anat Kurz (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2014) pp. 35-55, <https://bit.ly/2UW048o>.
- 6 Amos Yadlin, "Israel's Need to Take a Stand against the Assad Regime: A Moral Imperative and Strategic Necessity," *INSS Insight* No. 823, May 22, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2WmLBj4>; and Shlomo Cesana, "Assad is the Angel of Death, All Red Lines Have Been Crossed," *Israel Hayom*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/547537>.
- 7 See Itai Brun, "'The Culminating Point of Success': Risk Overload in the Campaign between Wars in Syria," *INSS Insight* No. 1124, January 6, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2uwbml5>.
- 8 See for example Boaz Ganor, "Commentary: Assad is too Weak to Respond to Israeli Strike," *Channel 2 News*, January 30, 2013, <https://www.mako.co.il/news-columns/Article-9f03729a4fc8c31004.htm>.
- 9 Christopher Phillips, "The World Abetted Assad's Victory in Syria," *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/assad-victory-syria/566522/>; Mara Karlin, "After 7 Years of War, Assad has Won in Syria. What's Next for Washington?" Brookings Institution, February 13, 2018, <https://brook.gs/2o2vCqX>.
- 10 For Bashar's speech, see SANA (Syran Arab News Agency, Damascus), August 20, 2017, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=112249>.
- 11 Itamar Eichner and Yoav Zeitoun, "Israel: Assad Continues to Produce Chemical Weapons," *Ynet*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5225784,00.html>; *Haaretz*, "Confidential UN Report: North Korea Sent Syria Materials for Building a Chemical Weapons Factory," December 4, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/.premium-1.5863602>; Pesach Malovany, "Is Syria Renewing its Nuclear Activity?" *Israel Defense*, January 11, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2HLwb4s>.
- 12 See for example Hazem Mustafa (pseudonym) (translated by Naziha Baassiri), "Do Alawis Want to Fully Become Shia Offshoot?" *Syria Untold*, March 9, 2017, <https://syriauntold.com/2017/03/09/do-alawis-want-to-become-shia/>; Khalid Sindawi, "Shi'ism and Conversion to Shi'ism in Syria: Prevalence, Circumstances and Causes," Ninth Annual Herzliya Conference, <https://bit.ly/2uv1JmC>.
- 13 Amos Harel and Amir Tibon, "Iran and Russia Preparing for Battle for Control in Syria on the Day after Assad's Victory," *Haaretz*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.6429496>; Amos

- Harel, "Following Wave of Israeli Attacks, Iran Intends to Distance its Activity from the Damascus Airport," *Haaretz*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.6914130>. For more about Syria-Iran relations, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).
- 14 See for example Zvi Hauser and Itzik Tsarfati, "Comments on a National Strategy for the Golan Heights," Kohelet Policy Forum, January 2018, [https://kohelet.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/KPF075\\_eGolan\\_290118.pdf](https://kohelet.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/KPF075_eGolan_290118.pdf).
  - 15 Orly Azoulay, "Trump: 'The Time has Come for the U.S. to Recognize Israel's Sovereignty over the Golan Heights,'" *Ynet*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5482038,00.html>.
  - 16 See for example *Haaretz*, "Russia Secretly Offered the U.S. to Assist in the Rehabilitation of Syria; Washington Objects," August 4, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/1.6340919>.
  - 17 "Trump on the Withdrawal from Syria: 'Israel is Doing Very Well Defending Itself,'" *Ynet*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5434291,00.html>.
  - 18 See for example Yaron Schneider, "Assad: Only if We Grow Stronger Will We Stop Israel," *Channel 2 News*, May 31, 2018, [https://www.mako.co.il/news-world/arab-q2\\_2018/Article-44f4de29ab4b361004.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/news-world/arab-q2_2018/Article-44f4de29ab4b361004.htm).