

Making Syria's Choices Starker

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**Statement for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
October 30, 2003 Hearing on Syria-U.S. Policy Directions**

Since assuming the Syrian presidency in June 2000 on the death of his father Hafez al-Asad, Bashar al-Asad has established a track record. The regime change in Syria has been bad for Syria, bad for the Middle East, and bad for U.S.-Syrian relations. In every area of concern to the United States, Bashar Asad's rule has been worse than that of his father – which is impressive, given how bad a ruler was his father. And the problems are growing, not diminishing. The risk is that if Washington basically ignores Syria, Bashar Asad will go from bad to worse.

Bashar Asad's track record makes depressing reading. Things have gotten worse in the areas where Hafez Asad was a problem - and where there was good reason to hope Bashar Asad would make improvements:

* **Anti-peace-process terrorism.** Commenting about Bashar Asad's provision to Hezbollah of Syrian 270 mm rockets which threaten Israel's third largest city (Haifa), Washington Institute Director Dennis Ross wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Hafez Assad was no slouch when it came to threatening Israel. But he controlled the flow of Iranian arms to Hezbollah, and he never provided Syrian weapons directly. Bashar Asad seems to lack his father's sense of limits."ⁱ Besides the provision of these dangerous rockets, another sign of Bashar Asad's imbalance is that Hafez Asad never met with Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah; Bashar Asad not only meets and telephones Nasrallah often, but Bashar Asad goes so far as to treat Nasrallah like his respected mentor and advisor. While Bashar Asad promised Secretary of State Colin Powell during his May 2003 visit to Damascus that Syria would take concrete steps against terrorists operating out of Syria, Powell has described Syria's actions since then as "limited steps" which "are totally inadequate."ⁱⁱ

* **WMD.** Rather than just maintaining Syria's already troubling capabilities to hit Israel with hundreds of CW-tipped Scud missiles, Bashar Asad has ploughed ahead with

developing more sophisticated capabilities, including more toxic and persistent chemical weapons such as VX and longer-range missiles. According to reports from the CIA, Syria is building up a domestic missile industry, working on both solid propellant and liquid propellant product capabilities.

* Lebanon. Hafez Asad had the excuse of Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon which he could claim as justification for the continued Syrian military presence in Lebanon and for Syria's insistence that Hezbollah be allowed to have a potent military militia, years after all civil-war-era militias were disarmed. Israeli withdrawal in May 2000 ended that excuse, but Bashar Asad has insisted that Hezbollah retain its arms, thereby making it a destabilizing radical force in Lebanese politics. He has pulled about half of the 30,000 Syrian troops out of Lebanon but he has used Syrian secret police to continue to control the increasingly restive Lebanese.ⁱⁱⁱ

* Economic and political reform. The great hope was that Bashar Asad would make economic growth his priority, and that he would therefore allow more space for the private sector and more interaction with the outside world – civil society could begin to emerge. Initially, there was a Damascus Spring with limited liberalization – but winter came early, as those expressing criticisms were rounded up. For participating in civil society meetings in 2001, ten human rights activists were sentenced to prison for two to five years.^{iv} Last week, a military court began a kangaroo trial of fourteen human rights activists arrested for attending an August 2003 lecture marking the fortieth anniversary of the declaration of a state of emergency in Syria. Meanwhile, the September 2003 government reshuffle bodes ill for the few economic reforms Bashar Asad instituted in his first year. The new prime minister, Muhammad Naji Otri, can best be described as an old-style Baathist hack.

And on the areas where Hafez Asad had at least some minimal cooperation with U.S. interests, things have gotten dramatically worse under Bashar Asad:

* Peace negotiations with Israel are completely shut down. Damascus rarely bothers to pretend it is willing to talk to Israel. Syria has been unhelpful to initiatives to advance the peace process, including its efforts to twist the 2002 Saudi initiative at the Arab League to convert it from an offer to Israel normal relations with the Arab world into a restatement of maximalist Arab demands. Furious at the Saudi initiative, Bashar Asad went so far as to organize a rare mass protest in Damascus against the plan. Syria has encouraged the fiction that Israel has not fully withdrawn from Lebanon, despite the UN Security Council's firm determination that Israel has fulfilled its obligations under UN resolutions. Syrian policy appears to confirm the skeptics who thought that an Alawite-dominated government wants to keep the conflict with Israel going so as to justify its repressive rule as necessary for national unity against the external enemy.

*** The “do no evil” approach towards Iraq has been replaced with a bold willingness to take risks to work with the worst forces in Iraq. Whereas his father had a cold if not hostile relationship towards Saddam, Bashar Asad embraced him, re-opening an oil pipeline which had been closed for twenty years; between one and two billion dollars a year worth of oil flowed through that pipeline, though it is not clear how the revenue was shared between the two dictators. Bashar Asad flat-out lied to Secretary of State Colin Powell when he personally promised in March 2001 that any revenue from the pipeline would go into the UN oil-for-food program – a promise Powell thought sufficiently important that he had President Bush woken to share the good news. To be sure, in November 2002, Syria voted in the UN Security Council for Resolution 141 demanding Iraqi compliance with past UN orders, but it seems that Syria, like France, believed that resolution could be invoked to prevent U.S. military action against Iraq.**

Syrian policy got worse as the war approached. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has accused Syria of sending Saddam’s forces on the eve of the war night-vision goggles, antitank weapons, aircraft parts, and ammunition.^v During the war, Bashar Asad allowed thousands of irregulars to cross the border to fight on Saddam’s side; busloads of Syrian jihadists were joined by warriors from across the Arab world. What is particularly difficult to understand is why Bashar Asad remained friendly to the Saddam clan even after they lost power; Rumsfeld has accused Damascus of providing safe haven to fleeing Baath officials.^{vi} As recently as September, both Defense and State Department officials referred to a continuing flow of resistance volunteers across the Syrian border.^{vii} There are credible reports that Syria remains a safe haven for former Saddamites. Treasury Department officials have pressed Syria, with no known success, to live up to its obligations under UN Security Council Resolution 1443 to surrender to the U.S.-administered Fund for Development in Iraq the \$3 billion in Iraqi assets held in Syrian-controlled banks.^{viii}

*** The firm – indeed, cruel and inhumane – control over Islamists under Hafez Asad has been replaced with a permissive attitude for those who wish to attack U.S. interests. The concern in Hafez Asad’s time was his vicious repression of those with even modest Islamist tendencies, most evident in the 1982 slaughter of 10,000 residents of Hama. Initially, the hope was that Bashar would ease the state’s heavy hand on the genuinely religious while at the same time preventing radical Islamist terrorists from using Syrian soil. And indeed, right after the September 11, 2001 attacks, Syria did cooperate with the United States in going after al-Qaeda elements. But as State Department coordinator for counterterrorism Coffey Black said in May 2003, “We clearly don’t have the full support of the Syrian government on the Al-Qaeda problem. They have allowed Al-Qaeda personnel to come in and virtually settle in Syria with their knowledge and their support.”^{ix} Moreover, according to Italian prosecutors in their indictment of al-Qaeda members, “Syria has functioned as a hub for an al Qaeda network.” The Italian police wiretaps found that the suspects’ conversations “paint a detailed picture of overseers in Syria coordinating the movement of recruits and money.” As State Department spokesman said on October 8**

when asked about the Syrian Accountability Act, “Frankly, the Syrians have done so little with regard to terrorism that we don’t have a lot to work with.”^x

And then there is Syrian vitriol directed against the United States. Bashar Asad has warned Arabs against U.S. friendship, calling it “more fatal than its hostility.”^{xi} Syria’s attitude towards the war with Iraq was spelled out by Foreign Minister Faruq ash-Shara: “We want Iraq’s [that is, Saddam’s] victory.”^{xii}

Bashar Asad seems to be campaigning to join the axis of evil. He needs to be confronted with a starker choice: bigger sticks if he persists in this path, but bigger carrots if he makes significant progress in several of the areas outlined above.

It is in this context that the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003 recently passed the House of Representative. This Act provides the President flexibility, such that he could initially impose modest penalties from the list of six in the law while at the same time he could suggest to Damascus that failure to make progress on the matters of concern to Washington would lead him to impose some of the tougher penalties in that list of six. Some might say that the Act is largely symbolic, but do not underestimate the importance of symbols. The reaction by Damascus to the Act’s progress – extensive coverage in the Syrian press and frequent statements by Syrian officials – demonstrates how deeply the Syrian government cares about the U.S. stance towards their actions.

Whether or not some version of the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act becomes law, the United States has a variety of other instruments it can use to turn up the heat on Syria. Washington can hit hard at the legitimacy of the Asad dynasty through tough statements from top officials supporting democracy in Syria. Radio Sawa, which has a wide audience among Arab youth, could do tough reporting about Syria’s corruption, human rights violations and miserable economic performance. U.S. officials at various levels could meet in public with Syrian dissidents. It is encouraging to note that there will be a meeting in Washington in two weeks time of Syrian pro-democracy activists. Were State Department officials to attend the meeting, the message to Damascus would be clear.

At the same time, the United States could consider some carrots. Initial steps could build on Bashar Asad’s interest in computer technology, e.g., providing computer education – either over the internet or via a Peace Corps program in Syria– and enhancing training opportunities for Syrians in the United States. Should relations improve further, Washington could help promote Syria as a place where U.S. companies – especially in telecommunications, high tech, and oil/gas exploration – should pursue business.

It would be useful if U.S. actions were coordinated with the European Union (EU), which is planning to sign a trade association agreement with Syria in the near future. Surely it would be appropriate for the EU to adopt towards Syria the same stance it has about Iran’s

problematic policies; just as the EU openly says that progress towards a trade cooperation agreement with Iran must go hand in hand with progress on WMD proliferation, counter-terrorism, the stance on Middle East peace, and human rights, so any EU agreement with Syria should be contingent on progress on these fronts. The United States could offer to the EU that it would help strengthen Brussels hand in negotiations on these points by making clear that progress made with the EU would also lead Washington to provide trade- and investment-related breaks for Syria, e.g., relief on the \$366 million in debt Syria owes to the U.S. government – relief which would have little practical implication for U.S. taxpayers, since Syria has not made payments on that debt for years (\$245 million is in arrears).

Two years ago, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy published an optimistic monograph full of hope Bashar Asad would improve governance, open up Syria to the outside world, let Lebanon regain its sovereignty, and make peace with Israel.^{xiii} That study, prepared under my direction by an Israeli scholar, showed what an opportunity Bashar Asad had. He has not made good use of his first three years. Let us hope that if faced with starker choices between a better future and real risks for his regime, he will make better use of the coming years.

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Notes

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- i. Dennis Ross, "The Hidden Threat in the Mideast," *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2002.
 - ii. Press conference by Colin Powell, June 20, 2003.
 - iii. Estimates of Syrian troop strength in Lebanon differ; the source here is Alfred Prados, "Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues," Congressional Research Service paper IB92075, updated October 10, 2003, p 5.
 - iv. Amnesty International regularly covers the miserable human rights situation in Syria; cf. its October 21, 2003 press release about the start of the military court trial.
 - v. For references, see Max Abrahms, "When Rogues Defy Reason: Bashar's Syria," *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2003, p 53.
 - vi. For references, see the excellent article by Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the United States: Bad Habits Die Hard," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2003, pp 29-38.
 - vii. See Prados, "Syria: U.S. Relations," p 6.
 - viii. Douglas Jehl, "U.S. Believes Syrian Banks Hold \$3 Billion in Iraqi Funds," *New York Times*, October 21, 2003, p A8.
 - ix. Black's statement and the Italian indictment referred to in the next sentence are from Matthew Levitt, "Terror from Damascus, Part II: Hizballah and Al-Qaeda Terrorist Activity in Syria," Washington Institute *Peacewatch* No. 421, May 9, 2003.
 - x. Cited in Prados, "Syria: U.S. Relations," p 15.
 - xi. In his speech at the Arab summit at Sharm al-Sheikh, as carried on Syrian television, March 1, 2003.
 - xii. Syrian Arab News Agency, March 30, 2003.
 - xiii. Yossi Baidatz, *Bashar's First Year: From Ophthalmology to a National Vision*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 41, July 2001.