

# Syria's Regional Policy since 9/11

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## Introduction

On 10 June 2000, President Hafiz al-Asad passed away after 30 years in power. Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father and soon encountered momentous regional and international issues that radically transformed the configuration of power in the region.

The first was the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, pulling the rug of legitimacy out from under Syrian feet in Lebanon. The second was the election of Republican candidate George W. Bush as President of U.S. that ushered in a new policy agenda vis-a-vis West Asia.

After 22 years of occupation, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak made good on his campaign promise to withdraw his troops from Lebanon by 2000 by pulling out of the country ahead of schedule on May 24. Israel's withdrawal was swift and was watched by U.N. observers, who certified Tel Aviv's fulfillment of U.N. Resolution 425. on June 16, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan officially declared that Israel had completed its withdrawal. In the process, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), Israel's proxy army, speedily disintegrated, provoking and exodus of a significant number of Lebanese officers and their families, mainly Christians, into Israel. Other members and affiliates of the SLA surrendered to the incoming forces of Hizbollah, who claimed victory over the retreating Israelis.<sup>1</sup> Barak objected and reiterated his campaign pledge, which was to end Israel's "misguided" involvement in Lebanon. At the same time, he held Damascus and Beirut directly responsible for attacks on Israeli territory launched from Lebanon. Israeli army officers bolstered Barak's warning by suggesting that future retaliatory strikes from Israel "would not exclude" Syrian military installation in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup>

Hizbollah's preeminence spread like wild fire in the West Asia when Israel withdrew from Lebanon, and the Islamist party was credited with dealing Tel Aviv the first defeat ever. True, Israel beat a retreat, but its withdrawal changed the overall dynamics of the triangular Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese relationship. Verified by the U.N.

Israel's withdrawal pulled the rug of legitimacy out of the Syrian presence in Lebanon. No longer could Syria use Hizbollah as leverage against Israel without impunity. Nor could Syria any longer hope to wrest concessions from Israel during peace talks. Significantly, Israel apparently severed any future connection between Lebanon's and Syria's peace negotiating tracks. In fact, Lebanese and Syrian officials in March 2000 warned Israel from withdrawing unilaterally without a peace treaty<sup>3</sup>. Suddenly, the configurations of the Israeli-Syrian conflict appeared to change at the expense of Syria's role. Indeed, while enjoying the euphoria of victory, Syria feared that the rules of the game had changed in favor of Israel. Before long, those fears were confirmed when Israel's withdrawal sparked calls for Syrian redeployment in preparation for this withdrawal from Lebanon. Standing at the vanguard of opposition to Syrian presence were the Christians.<sup>4</sup> Out of this fluid situation, a new one emerged centering on Shebaa Farms. Lebanon, apparently at the behest of Syria, claimed that Israel's withdrawal was incomplete since the country still occupied Lebanese land, most notably Shebaa Farms. Shebba is an area on the southwestern slopes of Mount Hermon (Jabal al-Shaykh), which the Lebanese government and Hizbollah claim is occupied Lebanese territory, while the U.N., after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, considers it a land captured by Israel from Syria in the 1967 West Asia War.<sup>5</sup> In fact, during the run-up to Israel's withdrawal, the speaker of parliament, Nabih Berri, raised the question of Shebaa Farms, obviously at the instigation of Syria. When the issue first arose, few Lebanese, including even senior Hizbollah officials, knew of the case. Syria acknowledged Lebanon's claims to the territory. In addition, when the U.N. rejected Lebanon's claims, arguing that Shebaa Farms was not covered by Resolution 425 but by Resolution 242, and was therefore subject to Israeli-Syrian negotiation, Lebanon and Syria refused to acknowledge this U.N. position. They have been arguing (along with Hizbollah) that Israel has not completed its withdrawal from Lebanon and thus resistance will continue until all Lebanese territories are liberated.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, the same people who have been calling for the liberation of Shebaa did not know at the time of Israel's withdrawal that the territory belonged to Lebanon. Obviously, this assertion had in large measure its provenance in the party's utility to Syria. Damascus would keep using Hizbollah as a means of indirect pressure on Israel

until Syria retrieved its Golan Heights. Damascus would use Hizbollah to fend off Lebanese opposition to its presence in the country.<sup>7</sup> Indeed; Hizbollah has launched periodic military offensives against Israeli positions in Shebaa, transforming the area into a tinderbox that could explode into a regional war. Seen through the prism of Syria, Hizbollah (with its arsenal of Katyusha rockets) could serve as both a deterrent to Israel's aggression and a daily reminder to Israel that it would not enjoy peace of mind unless it withdrew from the Golan Heights.

### I.

The momentous transition in Syria coincided with a no less momentous transition in the United States, especially with regard to Washington's foreign policy in West Asia. The election of the Republican candidate George W. Bush as president ended two consecutive Democratic terms and ushered in a new policy agenda. Nowhere was the difference between the incoming Bush administration and the outgoing Clinton administration more pronounced than in U.S. foreign policy, especially regarding West Asia. In contrast to the Clinton administration, the Bush Administration had reservations about making the peace process (as a means to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and maintain stability in the West Asia) a cornerstone not only of its West Asia foreign policy but also of U.S. - Syrian and U.S.-Israeli relationships. In fact, early on in office, the Bush administration made it clear that its foreign policy concern in the West Asia was to reinforce the sanctions against Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

The Bush administration's desire for a minimalist approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict quickly submerged under a new and radical transformation of American foreign policy in the wake of the most tragic, horrific, and unprecedented acts of terror ever to have taken place on U.S. soil. Targeting U.S. symbols of economic and military power, Islamic extremists, followers, and/or members of Usama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organization, using hijacked planes as high-explosive bombs, struck the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, killing thousands of innocent victims. The sheer magnitude and enormity of this seminal event altered irreversibly not only the American way of life but also U.S. foreign policy priorities. Splitting the world between those "with the United States" and those "with the terrorists," President Bush declared a

war on terrorism and moved ahead with building an international coalition to fight terrorists and those countries that harbor them.

Syria condemned the September 11 terror attacks on the United States and readily participated in Washington's war on terrorism. In fact, according to U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, Syria gave a "treasure trove" of materials on al-Qaeda including information on Syrian members of the organization, mainly Mamoun Darkazanli and Mohammad Hydar Zammar, who were subsequently taken into Syrian custody. Secretary Powell admitted that the Syrians "have said and done some things, and have cooperated with us."<sup>9</sup> Shortly after September 11, Damascus and the Central Intelligence Agency worked on joint intelligence gathering operations in Aleppo, which had been the subject of Mohammad Atta's dissertation on urban planning. Atta was the leader of the terrorists who committed the September 11 attacks. Damascus also helped save American lives by assisting in foiling terror attacks on U.S. troops and interests in Bahrain and Ottawa.<sup>10</sup>

Tension between the United States and Syria surfaced once Damascus began to oppose Washington's efforts to remove Saddam Hussein. Syria opposed the use of military force while at the same time it called on Iraq to comply with pertinent U.N. Security Council resolutions. In an interview published on June 18, 2002, President al-Asad warned that "any military attack on Iraq would be a mistake," and said "no country in the world has the right to change the system of government in another country."<sup>11</sup> Yet, on November 8, 2002, Syria voted for U.N. Resolution 1441, which cited Iraq as remaining in "material breach" of its obligations and mandated an enhanced weapons inspection regime in Iraq.<sup>12</sup> By voting for the resolution, Syrian officials aimed at saving Iraq from a military strike. Even some officials asserted that Washington had guaranteed Damascus that, if Iraq cooperated with the inspection regime created by the resolution, war would be averted. This was the reason Syria voted for the resolution.<sup>13</sup>

But, soon enough, tension intensified between the two countries as Syria became a leading critic of the U.S.-led campaign against Iraq, which culminated in Operation Iraqi Freedom, launched on March 19, 2003. On March 30, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara told the Syrian parliament that "Syria has a national interest in the expulsion of the invaders from Iraq".<sup>14</sup> If this and similar Syrian statements angered U.S.

officials, intelligence reports following the U.S. invasion of Iraq that Syria had provided Iraq with military equipment including night-vision goggles, had given safe haven to senior Iraqi officials, and had allowed Jihadis to cross the border into Iraq, infuriated U.S. officials to the point they were ready to take action against the country. On March 28, 2003 Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld delivered a stern warning to Syria, “saying it be would held accountable.”<sup>15</sup> Although Syrian officials rejected all charges, Damascus had become the focus of concern for and the target of strong rhetoric by the Bush administration.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Syria became a de facto member of the axis of evil.

Consequently, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus in early May 2003 and delivered a blunt and forthright message to Damascus’s leadership. Syria should take note of the new reality in the West Asia and accordingly adjust its policies. Significantly, besides making it clear that Washington would not condone any Syrian meddling in Iraqi affairs, Powell emphasized that Damascus must close all offices of terrorist organizations (including dismantling Hizbollah in Lebanon) and expel their leaders, as well as see to it that the Lebanese army extends its authority to the Lebanon-Israel border.<sup>17</sup>

Obliviously, Syrian opposition to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq formalized Washington’s attitude toward Syria. Not only did the peace process stop being a cornerstone of the U.S.-Syrian relationship, and by extension the modulator of other U.S.-Syrian bilateral issues (arms proliferation, terrorism, and Lebanon), but also every bilateral issue became a bone of contention between the two countries.

Catching the world by surprise, this rising tension between the two countries became the source of universal and confusing speculation and apprehension. On a deeper level, this tension had been the product of change in the ambivalent attitude of the United States toward Syria. The fall of Baghdad and the immense challenges facing the United States in stabilizing and democratizing Iraq have intensified U.S. concerns about possible Syrian and Iranian meddling with Iraqi affairs. Exacerbating these concerns was the position of President Bashar al-Asad of Syria who has emerged as the Arab leader par excellence championing Arab nationalism and opposing U.S. intervention on Iraq. This position has not only changed the dynamics of the ambivalent attitude of the United States towards Syria (in favor of the hard-liners) but has also marked an ominous break

with the pattern that Hafiz al-Asad, Bashar's father, established as president of modern Syria. Ironically, where the senior al-Asad had sacrificed Arab nationalism at the altar of Syria's national interest in general and regime security in particular, the Syrian leadership today has been advancing Arab nationalism with the objective of countering U.S. plans in the region.

## II.

Amid the tense atmosphere in U.S.-Syrian relations consequent upon Damascus's constant opposition to U.S. efforts in Iraq, the idea of punishing Syria made a comeback in Washington. Congress resurfaced legislations punishing Syria in the form of the 2003 Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA)<sup>18</sup>. The Act calls on Syria "to halt support for terrorism, end its occupation of Lebanon, and stop its development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)" and holds Syria accountable for its role in the West Asia.

The Syrian leadership's equivocal position on Iraq and Hizbollah soon caught up with them. In addition to imposing sanctions on Syria, the Bush administration found in France an ally to pressure Damascus to withdraw from Lebanon and disband Hizbollah's militia.<sup>19</sup> Because of their lobbying, along with that of Lebanese Diaspora the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1559 in September 2004, which called on remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon, insisted on the disbanding of Lebanese militias, and declared support for a free and fair presidential election. Damascus could no longer escape the radar of the world community. Even Arab countries such as those of the Gulf Cooperation Council urged Syria to respect the Resolution.<sup>20</sup>

Still, Damascus committed a big mistake by directing its loyalists in Lebanon to extend for three years the term of its ally, President Emile Lahoud, in the face of almost universal Lebanese opposition. Apparently, the Syrians chose continuity over unpredictability by keeping Lahoud. Sticking to their old strategy, the Syrians wanted an ally in Lebanon who could withstand domestic and international pressure by insisting on the resistance role of Hizbollah and "special relations" with Syria. In addition, Damascus would maintain its strategic cooperation with Iran by keeping the Iran-Damascus -

Hizbollah axis as an option against growing Israeli and American warnings about Tehran's nuclear plans.

However, what the Syrians had failed to realize was that since the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in the summer of 2000 the political dynamics of the county had changed and, by extension, their Lebanese-Hizbollah strategy had outlived its purposes. It was no coincidence that many Lebanese, including Syrian allies, opposed the extension of Lahoud's term. Significantly, Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Druze community, was vocal in his opposition to amending the Lebanese constitution and extending the president's term. In the meantime, Marwan Hamade, a member of parliament and Jumblatt's Democratic Gathering, narrowly escaped an assassination attempt.<sup>21</sup> Even the most ardent of Syrian supporters knew that Syrian intelligence, with that of Lebanon, was behind the attempt.

Relying on U.N. support, the opposition swelled its ranks and triggered a domestic recrimination of Lahoud that almost forced him out of power and eventually brought down the Syrian order in Lebanon. In fact, the controversial debate over the Syrian presence in Lebanon had polarized the country along confessional/sectarian lines coinciding with party lines, supporting or opposing Syria. Significantly, The Druze leadership, along with some Sunni leaders including former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, had moved closer to the Maronite-led opposition to Syria, which supported U.N. Resolution 1559. Growing extremely wary of Syrian political (and intelligence) maneuvers in Lebanon, Jumblatt incessantly criticized Syrian heavy handed involvement in Lebanese affairs, particularly the infiltration of Lebanese institutions by Syrian Mukhabarat (intelligence).

### III.

In a dramatic twist of events in Lebanon, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in a massive bombing in Beirut on February 14, 2005. The assassination marked the beginning of a new era in Lebanon, the implications of which could be profound for the country and the region. Significantly, this new era decided the fate of the "Second Republic," created by Syria's occupation over the country in 1990. In fact, the



assassination of Hariri was arguably a deliberate attempt by the Syrians to prevent what many in Lebanon perceived as a “white coup” against the pro-Syrian government, leading to the collapse of Syrian authority in Lebanon.

Lebanese politics had been polarized by the extension of the term of the pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud and by U.N. Resolution 1559, which called for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the disbanding of Hizbollah. In fact, the U.N. resolution not only helped the opposition to Syrian presence broaden its base of support but also gave the opposition an international political cover. Conversely, by losing international recognitions of its authority in Lebanon, Damascus’s political order in the country had become precarious.

The swiftness with which the opposition not only blamed Syria but also held the Lebanese government responsible (even bluntly asking it not to participate in Hariri’s funeral procession) attested to the new political climate dawning on Lebanon and determination of the opposition to confront and overthrow Syria’s authority in Lebanon.<sup>22</sup> In a dramatic shift of Sunni political attitude, Sunni Muslims held a broad communal meeting, chaired by Mufti Muhammad Rashid Qabani, in which they issued a statement condemning the assassination of Hariri and insisted that “the murder of the martyr Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri targeted the existence, role and dignity of Muslims Sunnis.” They added that “they would not be satisfied with deploring this crime... and they have had enough injustice and that patience could no longer be borne.”<sup>23</sup>

On February 28, 2005, despite a governmental ban on public demonstrations, thousands of Lebanese took to the streets, chanting “Syria out.” This nonviolent large-scale demonstration, described by Washington as the “Cedar Revolution,” brought down the pro-Syrian government of Omar Karame. Dennis Ross noted that “there is little doubt that the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine appears to have had profound effect on the psychology of the Lebanese. Note how the Lebanese have borrowed from Kiev’s example by creating a tent city at the site of the assassination and refusing to leave until the government resigns and the Syrians withdraw.”<sup>24</sup>

The speed with which Syria’s authority in Lebanon had eroded was also reflected by the army’s and internal security apparatus’s refusal to prevent the demonstrations. No less important, Hizbollah, the most ardent of Syria’s supporters, refused to participate in



the planned pro-government rally, effectively scuttling the event. At the same time, Syria's closest regional and international friends joined the chorus, calling on the country to withdraw from Lebanon. Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah told al-Asad during his visit to the Kingdom that "Syria must start withdrawing soon, otherwise Saudi-Syrian relations will go through difficulties."<sup>25</sup> Even Russia told Syria its troops should go, a change for a country that abstained when the UN Security Council passed a U.S.-inspired resolution to that effect in September.<sup>26</sup>

In a political move meant to challenge the Lebanese opposition and show solidarity with Syria, Hizbollah and other Syrian allies called for a peaceful demonstration on March 8 in Beirut to rally support against what they called "foreign intervention". Shedding his initial neutral stance following Hariri's assassination, Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah responded to al-Asad's signal by stating that the demonstration was to "denounce Resolution 1559, to show thanks, loyalty and appreciation the Syrian leadership, people and army for its achievements in Lebanon."<sup>27</sup>

But Hizbollah (and Syria) apparently underestimated Lebanese frustration with the pro-Syrian order in the country and eagerness for freedom and democracy. Reacting to Hizbollah's show of force and solidarity with Syria, approximately 1.5 million Lebanese took to the streets on March 14, clamoring for freedom and calling for Syria's swift withdrawal. It was the largest demonstration ever in Lebanon's history, not only eclipsing that organized by Hizbollah but also sending a message to the Islamist party that its role in the country has limits. The demonstration hastened the collapse of the Syrian order in Lebanon and apparently convinced the Syrian to withdraw as soon as possible from the country. The demonstration sent shock waves across the Arab world. Arab leaders were apprehensive about the implications of the collapse of the Syrian order in Lebanon by popular will for their rule. Arabs were awed by the determination of the Lebanese to replace a security regime by democratic government through nonviolent means. No less important was the impact of the demonstration on the international community. Not only did it reinforce the determination of the international community, in particular the United States and France, to keep the pressure on Syria, but also to make sure that upcoming Lebanese elections were conducted in a free and fair atmosphere.

In addition, President Bush in early May renewed economic sanctions on Syria implemented a year ago, saying its government still supports terrorism and is undermining efforts to stabilize Iraq.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, a report by a fact-finding mission sent to Beirut by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan to look into Hariri's assassination was released by the international organization. The report stated that:

After gathering the available facts, the Mission concluded that the Lebanese security services and the Syrian Military Intelligence bear the primary responsibility for the lack of security, protection, law and order in Lebanon... it is also the mission's conclusion that the Government of Syria bears primary responsibility for the political tension that preceded the assassination of former Prime Minister Mr. Hariri.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Asad criticized the U.N.'s report, saying that "it is a report of political character when I was expecting a report of technical criminal nature."<sup>30</sup> however, implicated in the assassination and under growing international pressure, the Syrian regime set a date for its withdrawal from Lebanon. In a joint news conference meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara in Damascus, U.N. envoy Terje Roed-Larsen announced Syria's commitment to withdraw all its military and intelligence forces from Lebanon by April 30.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, in a marked shift from its strategy that conflicted with that of the United States on Syria, the European Union, insisting on a full withdrawal from Lebanon and free parliamentary elections, refused to sign the association agreement, which "involves billions of dollars of aid to Damascus as well as the creation of an EU-Syrian free trade zone."<sup>32</sup>

On April 26, al-Shara, in an official letter to U.N. Secretary General Annan, stated that "Syrian Arab forces stationed in Lebanon at the request of Lebanon and under an Arab mandate have fully withdrawn all their military, security apparatus and assets to their positions in Syria."<sup>33</sup> A U.N. team, led by Brigadier General Elhadji Kandji of Senegal, was dispatched to Lebanon to verify Syria's evacuation. On May 23, U.N. Secretary General Annan stated that "a United Nations mission has verified that Syrian troops and security forces have fully withdrawn from Lebanon."<sup>34</sup>

### IV.

Syria has been trying to improve its relations with regional countries mainly to mobilize Arab and Muslim support against any U.S. campaign against Syria and to deprive Washington from regional allies, mainly Turkey, that could serve as a launch pad for U.S. campaign. Arab leaders have been vocal about opposing American campaigns against any Arab country, let alone Syria. After all, the Arab league opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Most important, Damascus has been making a constant effort to improve its relationship with Ankara. The speedy and impressive rapprochement between the two countries was crowned by the official visit of President al-Asad and his wife to Turkey in January 2005, the first of its kind by a Syrian president. The visit heralded a new era of cooperation on issues of common concerns including trade, security, and the significant Iraq and Kurdish question. Turkish officials warmly welcomed al-Asad and his wife, affirming the potential of the new era. Turkish newspapers, reflecting the mood of the nation, described Syria as “now an ally” and the relationship between the two countries as a “partnership for peace and stability.”<sup>35</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to the tense atmosphere between the two countries that almost brought them to war in 1998.

Significantly, al-Asad silently took the initiative to officially drop his country’s claim on Hatay after nearly 70 years of resistance to Turkish sovereignty over the province.<sup>36</sup> The important step came in the wake of no less important measures taken by Syria. Following the terrorist bombings in Istanbul in November 2003, Turkey asked Syria to extradite two suspects. The Syrians promptly handed over 22 Turks who were receiving religious education in Damascus, including the two suspects.

Obviously, the swiftness with which this rapprochement is moving indicates that the two countries have more shared views on West Asia and especially on Iraq than differences.<sup>36</sup> Insofar as this rapprochement is no guarantee of Turkish support of Syria in the event Washington decided to take certain actions against Damascus, it makes it extremely difficult for Ankara to support Washington.

Meanwhile, in line with its strategy to enhance its regional standing, Damascus has sought to widen its international base of support. Besides undertaking a shuttle diplomacy that took him to some European capitals, al-Asad made historic visits to China and Russia, the two permanent members of the U.N. Security Council.

Syria is operating in an area where Arab power or Arab capacity to influence regional events, including dictating Arab agenda in the West Asia, has been reduced to insignificance. The collapse of the Ba’thist regime of Saddam Hussein all but crumbled the much vaunted but fragmented fertile crescent power base (Syria and Iraq), the birthplace of strident Arab nationalism as illustrated by the Ba’th party. Syria’s attempts at shoring up its regional power set in sharp relief the emergence of non-Arab powers in the West Asia, represented by Turkey, Iran, and Israel, each of which could influence the region more than any other Arab country. Add to that the influence of the United States in the region, and Syria’s regional role appears all but dissipated.

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