



# SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

## ABOUT THE REPORT

During the 1990s, George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton managed to achieve strategic cooperation with Syrian leader Hafiz al-Asad despite Syria's sponsorship of terrorism, development of WMD, alliance with Iran, and domination of Lebanon. Almost as soon as George W. Bush and Hafiz's son, Bashar, became presidents, however, relations between their countries began to deteriorate significantly. Since then, cooperation has given way to severe confrontation.

This report examines the reasons for this recent change in U.S.-Syrian relations, among them the attacks of 9/11, Bashar's vehement opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and George W. Bush's ideals of freedom and democracy and his embrace of certain conservative ideas. Bush, it seems, has decided to punish Bashar and even, perhaps, to bring about his downfall. Meanwhile, Bashar, who has been influenced by conservative circles within Damascus and has publicly embraced pan-Arab ideology, has contributed by both word and deed to Washington's antagonism.

The report explores two possible future scenarios—escalated confrontation and renewed cooperation—and concludes by proposing a third option: an incremental movement toward a more productive relationship.

Moshe Ma'oz is a Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. A professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Ma'oz has published many works on Syria and has advised Israeli governments on Middle Eastern affairs.

**The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.**

SPECIAL REPORT 146

AUGUST 2005

## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction                                     | 2  |
| Bush and Bashar: Deteriorating Relations         | 3  |
| Prospects, Options, and Scenarios                | 9  |
| Conclusion: An Alternative, Incremental Approach | 12 |

*Moshe Ma'oz*

## Washington and Damascus

### Between Confrontation and Cooperation

#### Summary

- Soon after both men came to power in 2000, relations between U.S. president George Bush and Syria's president Bashar al-Asad began to deteriorate significantly. Since the Iraq war of 2003, Washington and Damascus have been on a collision course.
- Washington has resented the indirect assistance provided by Syria to Saddam's regime and to his loyalists, both before and after the U.S. occupation of Iraq.
- The United States has also strongly disapproved of Syria's sponsorship of terrorism, particularly after 9/11—even though Damascus was not involved in those attacks on New York and Washington.
- The White House and Congress have other grievances, too, including Syria's development, with help from Iran and North Korea, of weapons of mass destruction; Syria's occupation (until April 2005) of Lebanon; and the "tyrannical" nature of Bashar's regime.
- In December 2003 President Bush signed the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act (SALSA), which imposes economic and diplomatic sanctions against Damascus. Conservative circles in Washington have also advocated adopting military measures if Syria does not comply with U.S. demands.
- These hard-line, confrontational positions contrast sharply with good U.S.-Syrian working relations during the 1990s, when Presidents Bush Sr. and Clinton cooperated with President Asad Sr. on such issues as the Iraq-Kuwait war and the Syrian-Israeli peace process.
- Bashar, although constrained by his conservative circles, has suggested renewing peace negotiations with Israel without preconditions, as well as starting a dialogue with the United States. But both Washington and Jerusalem have turned down Bashar's overtures, insisting that he comply with U.S. demands.
- Washington has intensified its pressure on Damascus since the assassination in Beirut in February 2005 of a former Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq Hariri. Washington indirectly blamed Syria for the killing and withdrew its ambassador from Damascus.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan federal institution created by Congress to promote the prevention, management, and peaceful resolution of international conflicts. Established in 1984, the Institute meets its congressional mandate through an array of programs, including research grants, fellowships, professional training, education programs from high school through graduate school, conferences and workshops, library services, and publications. The Institute's Board of Directors is appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the Senate.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**J. Robinson West** (Chair), Chairman, PFC Energy, Washington, D.C. • **María Otero** (Vice Chair), President, ACCION International, Boston, Mass. • **Betty F. Bumpers**, Founder and former President, Peace Links, Washington, D.C. • **Holly J. Burkhalter**, Advocacy Director, Physicians for Human Rights, Washington, D.C. • **Chester A. Crocker**, James R. Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University • **Laurie S. Fulton**, Partner, Williams and Connolly, Washington, D.C. • **Charles Horner**, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C. • **Seymour Martin Lipset**, Hazel Professor of Public Policy, George Mason University • **Mora L. McLean**, President, Africa-America Institute, New York, N.Y. • **Barbara W. Snelling**, former State Senator and former Lieutenant Governor, Shelburne, Vt.

### MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

**Michael M. Dunn**, Lieutenant General, U.S. Air Force; President, National Defense University • **Peter W. Rodman**, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs • **Condoleezza Rice**, Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State • **Richard H. Solomon**, President, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting)

- Washington has three options in its approach toward Damascus. One is to continue along the current collision course, seeking to force a change either in Bashar's policy or in the regime in Damascus. This option, however, poses significant problems. A second option is to engage and cooperate with Syria and to promote a renewed peace process with Israel. This approach could yield a win-win result but seems unlikely to happen given the opposition of George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon and Bashar's weakness. The third option is to adopt an incremental, pragmatic approach, displaying a big stick but also using carrots to induce Damascus to gradually change its behavior and to reward it accordingly. Of the three options, this is both the most realistic and the most promising.

## Introduction

Washington and Damascus are on a collision course. President George Bush apparently harbors deep antagonism toward President Bashar Asad. The U.S. government is applying economic and diplomatic sanctions against Syria and may be considering military measures. There are many bones of contention between the two countries:

- Bashar vehemently opposed the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, claiming that U.S. actions have served Israeli strategic interests while posing a serious potential threat to Syria and other Arab countries.
- Bashar has continued to provide logistical help to Saddam's loyalists and allowed Arab combatants to cross from Syrian territory into Iraq to join anti-U.S. insurgents/terrorists there.
- Damascus has continued to sponsor other U.S.-designated terrorist groups, including the anti-Israeli Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, hailing them as "national liberation movements."
- Syria has continued to maintain its alliance with Iran and its military ties with North Korea, both members of Bush's "Axis of Evil." According to the Congressional Research Service, aid from Iran, China, and North Korea is essential to the further development, production, and stockpiling of Syria's WMD, notably chemical warheads, apparently to counterbalance Israel's nuclear capability. (Alfred B. Prados, *Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues* [Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 25, 2005]; and Central Intelligence Agency, *Unclassified Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions, 1 January through 30 June 2002*).
- Syria continued to control Lebanon until April 2005, despite U.S. demands from 2003 onward that Damascus pull out its military forces and secret agents from that country. After the assassination on February 14, 2005, of Rafiq Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister, the Bush administration increased pressure on Syria to withdraw. Two months later, on April 26, 2005, Syria completed its withdrawal.
- The Bush administration has underscored the need for greater freedom and democracy in Syria (and in all Arab countries). Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has labeled Bashar's regime "tyrannical."

U.S.-Syrian antagonism has accelerated steadily since the ascendancy of Bashar to the Syrian presidency in July 2000 and the election of Bush as U.S. president in November 2000, suggesting that the antagonism is not only based on strategic and political interests but also motivated by ideology and perhaps by personal animosity. Each leader views the other as holding a belief system antithetical to his own. Bashar considers Bush to be anti-Arab and pro-Israel while Bush regards Bashar as anti-American and a terror-sponsoring tyrant.

The crucial question is, Where is this confrontation leading and what options does each of the leaders have? Will current tensions escalate and lead to further U.S. sanc-

tions, to the application of military pressures, and, in the worst-case scenario, to the U.S. occupation of Syria? What are Bashar's options? He can choose to fully or partly accept U.S. dictates—as he has in the case of the recent Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon—or he can try to resist U.S. demands in the name of Arabism (and perhaps also Islam), as well as to help create an anti-American Shi'i axis with Iran and Hezbollah. (The Alawite religious minority, to which Bashar belongs, considers itself a part of the Shi'i religion).

What are the chances for a more peaceful outcome? Under what conditions and circumstances can Washington and Damascus cooperate to advance their vital strategic interests? There is a recent history of cooperation. President George Bush Sr., and President Bill Clinton cooperated with Bashar's father, President Hafiz al-Asad, in fighting the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990–91 and in advancing the Syrian-Israeli peace process from 1991 to 2000. To be sure, that U.S.-Syrian collaboration occurred even though Asad was a more brutal tyrant than his son has proved to be and was guilty of many of the same “transgressions” of which Bashar is currently being accused: Asad sponsored terrorism, occupied Lebanon, cultivated Hezbollah, formed an alliance with Iran, and developed WMD with Russian, Chinese, and North Korean help. Why, then, does it seem so difficult for Bush and Bashar to cooperate as their fathers did? Is it because they are heavily influenced by their conservative circles and their respective ideologies—Bashar by pan-Arabism and his desire to enhance his legitimacy in the Arab world, and Bush by his religious beliefs and by the more conservative members of his party, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and Israel? What role does the current Iraqi situation—so different from the situation in 1990 when U.S. and Syrian interests coincided—play in contributing to the clash between Syria and the United States? Does Bush's tough position on Syria derive also from his zero tolerance toward terrorism after 9/11?

The chief aims of this report are to examine the causes of the current U.S.-Syrian confrontation, to compare it with U.S.-Syrian cooperation under the leadership of Bush Sr., Clinton, and Asad Sr.—and to outline options and scenarios for the future of relations between Washington and Damascus. Two scenarios are examined. The first, which mirrors what seems to be a strong tendency of the Bush administration, is that Washington punishes Damascus in an effort to force a change in Syrian policies or perhaps even a change in regime. The second scenario envisages Washington negotiating with Damascus a framework for bilateral cooperation based on mutual interests and understandings. This report presents a third option, one that seems more constructive and nuanced than the first scenario and more realistic than the second: namely, that the Bush administration use a mixture of sticks and carrots to induce Syria to change its behavior and to reward it for doing so.

## **Bush and Bashar: Deteriorating Relations**

*“The U.S. has a growing list of differences with Damascus . . . relations . . . are worsening.”*

—SECRETARY OF STATE CONDOLEEZZA RICE (*WASHINGTON POST*, FEBRUARY 16, 2005)

When George W. Bush won the U.S. presidential election in 2000, Bashar expected that the new president would continue Bush Sr.'s legacy of an evenhanded approach to settling the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to the Syrian Ba'ath newspapers, Bush Jr. would not let the “Jews who comprise only one percent of the U.S. population continue to be the political decision makers in the superpower that controls the world today” (*al-Ba'ath*, November 4, 2000). But within a short period, Bashar encountered a new U.S. administration that became more anti-Syrian and more pro-Israeli than the previous administrations of Bill Clinton and George Bush Sr. These new attitudes were most manifest in the Defense Department, as well as in Congress. Initially, while Secretary of State Colin Powell tried to counterbalance these anti-Syrian tendencies and court Damascus, President Bush held pragmatic diplomatic positions toward Damascus. He distanced himself from the

***Why does it seem so difficult for Bush and Bashar to cooperate as their fathers did?***

***Within a short period, Bashar encountered a new U.S. administration that became more anti-Syrian and more pro-Israeli than the previous administrations of Bill Clinton and George Bush Sr.***

Congress-sponsored Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act (SALSA) of September 2002, which sought to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions against Syria. He asked the House International Relations Committee to delay the proceedings regarding this bill lest it narrow U.S. options and affect interests concerning Syria. But in October 2003, with the U.S. military heavily engaged in Iraq, Bush dropped his opposition to the SALSA, which was then approved by almost all members of the Congress and subsequently signed by the president. Around the same time, Bush approved *post facto* an Israeli air strike on an alleged Palestinian terrorist base near Damascus, the first such strike since the 1970s. This action was in retaliation for a suicide bombing by Islamic Jihad at an Israeli restaurant in Haifa. Bush stated after the Israeli raid in Syria, "Israel's got the right to defend itself. Israel must not feel constrained in defending its homeland" (*New York Times*, October 7, 2003).

***Bush also seems to have developed toward Bashar a personal and an ideological antipathy, which some observers contend has since shaped Washington policy toward Damascus. Bashar had certainly contributed to Bush's hostile attitude, not least by his vehement opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq.***

By that time, Bush also seems to have developed toward Bashar a personal and an ideological antipathy, which some observers contend has since shaped Washington policy toward Damascus (see, for example, David Brooks's remarks at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 24, 2005). Bashar had certainly contributed to Bush's hostile attitude, not least by his vehement opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Probably influenced by his conservative old guard, Bashar responded by and large in a defiant manner to Bush's requests to change his behavior and policies, presenting himself as the defender of Iraq and Arabism. But in mid-2003, when he realized that U.S. forces deployed in neighboring Iraq were potentially endangering his rule, Bashar began making halfhearted attempts to mend fences with Washington. He has partly cooperated with the United States in preventing human and material assistance from reaching Iraqi insurgents and in detecting al Qaeda terrorists. Syria, which was not involved in the attacks of 9/11, has also partly cooperated with the CIA in hunting down al Qaeda activists. In addition, immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Asad sent a cable to President Bush expressing his condolences (Colin L. Powell, on-the-record press briefing, Washington, D.C., September 14, 2001). Most recently, Bashar withdrew troops from Lebanon, suggested renewing the peace process with Israel, promised to close the offices of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Damascus, and has periodically restrained Hezbollah. But, as is now apparent, Bush has not been impressed with what Washington regards as Bashar's "hollow measures," holding against Bashar grievances related to Syria's positions on terrorism, Iraq, WMD, Israel, Lebanon, and internal democracy. Let us examine each of these issues in turn.

### ***Terrorism***

*"Syria must choose the right side in the war on terror by closing terrorist camps and expelling terrorist organizations."*

—PRESIDENT GEORGE BUSH (SPEECH GIVEN ON JUNE 24, 2002)

Systematic combat against terrorism has been at the top of President Bush's agenda, particularly since 9/11. Dividing the world into those who support terrorism and those who oppose it, Bush makes no distinction between international anti-American terror, al Qaeda style, and the nationalist anti-Israeli terrorism of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. Bashar, in contrast, maintains that these organizations "are not terrorist movements, but national liberation movements" (*al-Majd*, Jordan, October 8, 2001).

***Bashar maintains that Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad "are not terrorist movements, but national liberation movements."***

Unlike his father, Bashar openly backed these organizations and was particularly impressed with Hasan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader. By siding with Hezbollah as well as with Hamas and Islamic Jihad during the Palestinian al-Aqsa intifada, Bashar aimed to demonstrate his pan-Arab, anti-Israeli ideology and policy. Such a position served to build his legitimacy in Syria and among other Arab nations. Bush, however, unlike his predecessors, has consistently denounced Syria (and Iran) for their support of terrorism, both before and after the U.S. conquest of Iraq.

## **Iraq**

*"[The] American attack against Iraq is aimed at dividing this country, which is Israel's strategic goal."*

—SYRIAN VICE PRESIDENT ABD AL-HALIM KHADDAM (SYRIAN NEWS AGENCY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2002)

From the time he first assumed power, Bashar carried on his father's efforts to improve Syria's relations with Iraq. Violating U.S.-backed UN sanctions against Iraq, Damascus allowed Iraqi oil to flow into Syria and Syrian goods into Iraq, for the benefit of both economies. With the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Iraqi oil ceased flowing to Syria.

A nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council from 2001 to 2003, Syria supported Resolution 1441 of November 2002, demanding that Iraq permit the renewal of UN supervisors' work; but, according to Damascus, the support was offered with the intention of preventing a U.S. offensive against Iraq. Indeed, unlike other Arab capitals, from the start of the diplomatic prelude to the war, Damascus vehemently opposed the U.S. "barbaric" attack, alleging that it was launched because the Americans "wanted oil and . . . to redraw the map of the region in accordance with Israeli interests" (*al-Safir*, Beirut, March 27, 2003). Bashar and other senior Syrian leaders sharply denounced the U.S. conduct, and Faruq al-Shara, the foreign minister, equated it to "Nazi-German behavior" (quoted by Eyal Zisser, *In the Name of the Father* [Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2003], p. 191). Damascus also tacitly encouraged public demonstrations against and harassment of U.S. institutions and diplomats in Syrian cities.

Furiously reacting, Washington accused Damascus of harboring the Saddam regime's fugitives, weapons, and monies, as well as of helping armed Arab volunteers to cross into Iraq and join the anti-American insurgency. On June 18, 2003, U.S. troops attacked a convoy—allegedly containing Iraqi fugitives—inside Syrian territory, killing many Syrian soldiers. This might have been a signal to Bashar that he would face further U.S. military measures if he did not change his behavior. In much the same vein, a U.S. official labeled Syria a "rogue nation" and accused it of "behaving badly," phrases suggesting that Syria could become the next target of U.S. military assault and occupation (*al-Hayat*, July 28, 2003; *New York Times*, October 12, 2003).

Although President Bush signed the SALSA in 2003, he waited—perhaps to give Bashar time to improve his behavior—until May 2004 to order the implementation of economic sanctions against Syria for failing to cease completely support for the anti-American insurgency in Iraq and for anti-Israeli terrorism by Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. Bashar became deeply concerned, not about the U.S. sanctions, which have in fact been rather mild, but about the deployment of U.S. troops in Iraq, his next-door neighbor. He obviously has hoped for the failure of the U.S. occupation of Iraq and has been encouraged by the continued anti-American insurgency. But Bashar has also realized that the United States has been persistent in implementing its goals in Iraq and has refused to withdraw its troops under the pressure of the insurgency. Thus he is still worried that Syria might indeed become the next target of an American military attack or that Syria could be isolated in the region and pressured to democratize. In either case, this could mean the demise of Bashar's rule in Damascus. Given these concerns, Bashar has endeavored since mid-2003 to improve relations with Bush by increasing his cooperation with the United States on closing the Syrian-Iraqi border to the continued flow of anti-American guerrillas and on investigating the money Saddam Hussein had deposited in Syrian banks. Damascus also supported the U.S.-sponsored resolution at the UN Security Council authorizing UN cooperation with the U.S.-led multinational force in the reconstruction of Iraq; backed the Iraqi national election in January 2005; and made several conciliatory statements toward the United States, including at the Ba'ath Party Congress in early June 2005 (*Washington Post*, June 10, 2005). But Bush and his administration have not been impressed and have continued to denounce Bashar sharply for his misdeeds in Iraq, sponsoring terror, associating with the "Axis of Evil," and developing WMD.

***Unlike other Arab capitals, from the start of the diplomatic prelude to the war, Damascus vehemently opposed the U.S. "barbaric" attack.***

***Bashar is still worried that Syria might indeed become the next target of an American military attack or that Syria could be isolated in the region and pressured to democratize.***

***Bashar has endeavored since mid-2003 to improve relations with Bush.***

## ***The Axis of Evil and Weapons of Mass Destruction***

***Syria has replaced Iraq as a full-fledged member of Bush's "Axis of Evil," alongside Iran and North Korea.***

***Syria has also developed chemical and possibly biological weapons and allegedly started a civic nuclear power program with Moscow's help.***

***When the Palestinian intifada erupted later that year, Bashar hailed it and subsequently permitted Hamas and Islamic Jihad to use Damascus as a base.***

***When, in December 2003, eight months after the beginning of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Bashar suggested renewing peace negotiations with Israel, most Israeli Jews doubted Bashar's sincerity.***

For years Syria was considered by Washington to belong, together with Libya and Cuba, to a "junior varsity Axis of Evil," mainly because it has developed WMD. In the wake of its vociferous opposition to the U.S. war against Iraq, and its initial assistance to Saddam's war efforts, Syria has been de facto "upgraded" and has replaced Iraq as a full-fledged member of Bush's "Axis of Evil," alongside Iran and North Korea. The United States and Israel may also consider Syria an important member in a regional alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. This alliance has cooperated mainly in carrying out anti-Israeli and, during the 1980s, anti-American terrorist and guerrilla actions. Damascus has also obtained Iranian help in providing weapons, training, and intelligence to Hezbollah, as well as in developing Syria's long-range missile system. Following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in Beirut on February 14, 2005, Damascus and Teheran declared a common front vis-à-vis the U.S. threat to dislodge Syrian control of Lebanon (*Financial Times*, February 17, 2005). Syria has been assisted not only by Iran but also by North Korea in building its long-range ballistic missiles. A December 2001 report by the CIA claims that "Damascus also continued its efforts to assemble—probably with considerable North Korean assistance—liquid fueled Scud C missiles," which can reach Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and most of Israel. Syria has also developed chemical and possibly biological weapons and allegedly started a civic nuclear power program with Moscow's help (Prados, *Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues*). Significantly, previous U.S. administrations had overlooked Syrian missiles and chemical programs, possibly regarding them as part of a justified deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Israel's nuclear capability. These administrations considered President Hafiz al-Asad as a potential regional partner who could help contain Iran and Iraq, stabilize Lebanon, and make peace with Israel. But as we know, this U.S. grand design was not implemented, in part because Syria and Israel could not reach a peace settlement.

## ***Israel***

*"The Golan has a place in the people's heart more than Judea and Samaria."*  
—ARIEL SHARON (*HA'ARETZ*, DECEMBER 28, 2003)

The collapse in March 2000 of the Syrian-Israeli peace talks taking place under U.S. auspices paved the way for the renewal of the long and bitter conflict between Damascus and Jerusalem. And when the Palestinian intifada erupted later that year, Bashar hailed it and subsequently permitted Hamas and Islamic Jihad to use Damascus as a base from which to launch terrorist attacks against Israel (including a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv on February 25, 2005). To foster his legitimacy as a pan-Arab leader, Bashar complemented his logistical support for the Palestinian cause with crude anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish rhetoric. Bashar said that Israel was an "illegitimate state" and "a racist society, even more racist than the Nazis." In May 2001, in the presence of Pope John Paul II near the Syrian-Israeli cease-fire line, Bashar urged that "Christians and Muslims should join in confronting Israel" and denounced "Jews who try to kill the principles of all religions with the same mentality with which they betrayed Jesus Christ and the same way they tried to kill the Prophet Muhammed" (*New York Times*, May 11, 2001).

Washington strongly protested these unprecedented slurs, while anti-Syrian feelings deepened among Israeli Jews and American Jews. And when, in December 2003, eight months after the beginning of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Bashar suggested renewing peace negotiations with Israel, most Israeli Jews doubted Bashar's sincerity. His enhanced alliances with Hezbollah and with Iran—archenemies of Israel and America—have increased mistrust of Bashar in both of those countries. Sharon and Bush rejected Bashar's proposal to renew peace talks with Israel, asserting that Damascus must first stop sponsoring Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist organizations and withdraw from Lebanon. But Bashar would not comply until April 2005 (see below), even though he

had already lost his justification for supporting the Hezbollah cause, given that Israel withdrew its troops from southern Lebanon in May 2000.

## **Lebanon**

*“Syria must also end its occupation of Lebanon.”*

—PRESIDENT GEORGE BUSH (SPEAKING IN BRUSSELS, REPORTED IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*, FEBRUARY 22, 2005)

Historically and ideologically, Damascus has thought of Lebanon as “Western” Syria, part of “Greater Syria,” and has never had formal diplomatic relations with Beirut. Damascus has also regarded Lebanon, particularly the Biqa valley, as a vital strategic asset in case of a war with Israel, as well as highly valuable to the Syrian economy. After the eruption of Lebanon’s civil war in 1975, the Lebanese Maronite-led government asked Damascus to intervene militarily to defeat the Muslim-Palestinian insurgency. Syria responded by dispatching its troops to Lebanon in 1976, and in a series of bloody battles Syria defeated the insurgents and assumed control of the country. The Ta’if Agreement, reached in 1989 under the auspices of the Arab League, and the Syrian-Lebanese Brotherhood and Friendship Pact of 1991 in many respects prolonged Syrian control over Lebanon. (Syria agreed in the Ta’if Agreement to relocate its troops to the Lebanese Biqa valley by 1992, but it did not implement the plan fully, withdrawing less than half of its troops from Lebanon). Although the Ta’if Agreement gave the Lebanese government the option to request Syrian military withdrawal, successive Lebanese governments—each of them practically formed by Damascus—did not invoke that option. Meanwhile, Syria continued strengthening its indirect domination.

The Lebanese people have been divided between those (mostly Maronites, Druze, and Sunnis) who want full independence from Damascus and those (mostly Shiites and especially Hezbollah) who support a continued Syrian presence. Until recently, the international community—including Arab states, the United States, and France (the oldest friend of Lebanon)—preferred to maintain the status quo. Only since the accession of Bashar and Bush have matters gradually changed. Domestic Lebanese opposition to Syrian domination has increased noticeably, owing in part to Bashar’s weakness and his growing sympathy for Hezbollah, while the 9/11 megaterror provoked Bush’s intense antagonism to any kind of terrorism and his antipathy to Bashar’s conduct.

The U.S. Congress initially took the lead in an attempt to dislodge Syria from Lebanon, launching, with American Jewish and American Lebanese backing, the legislative process that led eventually to Bush signing the SALSA in December 2003. Earlier in 2003, senior U.S. officials called upon Syria to withdraw its “occupation army” from Lebanon. In July 2003, Damascus redeployed its troops in Lebanon and withdrew several thousand soldiers, but some fourteen thousand troops remained, in addition to many hundreds of Syrian intelligence agents. Subsequently, more pressure was exerted on Syria by the United States, the United Nations, Arab states, and, for the first time, France. In September 2004, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1559, jointly sponsored by the United States and France, calling for “all remaining foreign forces [i.e., Syrian and Iranian] to withdraw from Lebanon” and for Hezbollah’s armed faction to be dismantled.

Damascus, however, would not comply, claiming that its troops in Lebanon were not foreign and that Hezbollah was a “liberation movement.” Lebanon’s prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, resigned several weeks later on October 20, 2004, ostensibly in protest of the Syrian-imposed three-year extension of Lebanese president Emile Lahoud’s term in office—an extension, in effect, of Syrian indirect control. Less than four months later, Hariri was assassinated in Beirut by an unknown organization. Many Lebanese believe that Damascus, seeking to eliminate a serious opponent to its continued domination of Lebanon, was involved in the assassination. Washington reacted by promptly recalling its ambassador from Damascus, linking Syria’s occupation of Lebanon to Hariri’s assassination. The United

***Historically and ideologically, Damascus has thought of Lebanon as “Western” Syria.***

***Domestic Lebanese opposition to Syrian domination has increased noticeably.***

***The U.S. Congress initially took the lead in an attempt to dislodge Syria from Lebanon.***

***Many Lebanese believe that Damascus, seeking to eliminate a serious opponent to its continued domination of Lebanon, was involved in the assassination.***

States led, with Arab and European support, an intense diplomatic campaign against Syria's continued occupation of Lebanon, threatening to accelerate its economic and diplomatic sanctions against Damascus, and requested a fresh UN resolution against Syria. Bashar reacted by "redeploying" several thousand of his troops in Lebanon, but until April 2005 continued to evade Bush's demand to withdraw also Syrian secret service agents and to end the occupation of Lebanon. Many Lebanese from different religious communities staged several peaceful demonstrations in Beirut, demanding that Syria leave and that the pro-Syrian government resign. On March 1, 2005, the Lebanese government of Umar Karami did so, further weakening Bashar's position. On March 5, 2005, Bashar announced the phased withdrawal of his army, first to Lebanon's Biqa valley, and eventually, on April 26, 2005, across the Lebanese-Syrian border. But he stated that "Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon does not mean the absence of Syria's role. Syria's strength and its role in Lebanon is not dependent on the presence of its forces in Lebanon" (*Washington Post*, March 6, 2005).

***Bashar can ill afford to give up all his influence in Lebanon—Syria's strategic asset—lest this also damage Syria's economy and particularly Bashar's own prestige at home.***

***Bashar faces another crucial challenge, or demand, posed by Bush: namely, introducing freedom and democracy in Syria.***

Indeed, Bashar can ill afford to give up all his influence in Lebanon—Syria's strategic asset—lest this also damage Syria's economy and particularly Bashar's own prestige at home. He is deeply concerned about Bush's attempt to use the Lebanese crisis to isolate him—and, perhaps, to eliminate him. Bashar appears to have authorized some indirect but crude demonstrations of Syria's important role in maintaining Lebanon's political security. On March 8, 2005, Damascus's close Lebanese ally Hezbollah staged a huge pro-Syrian demonstration in Beirut. During that same month, a series of deadly explosions occurred in Christian neighborhoods of Beirut, perhaps intended to signal the security hazards attendant upon Syria's departure. And on June 5, 2005, an anti-Syrian journalist, Samir Kassir, was assassinated in Beirut.

Beyond Lebanon, Bashar faces another crucial challenge, or demand, posed by Bush: namely, introducing freedom and democracy in Syria. Pressure on Bashar to move in this direction has been intensified by the democratic elections that were conducted in January 2005 in both Iraq and Palestine, by the four-stage elections held in Lebanon in May and June 2005, as well as by President Hosni Mubarak's decision to change the constitution of Egypt to allow more than one candidate to run in the presidential election scheduled to take place in Egypt in September 2005.

### ***Tyranny vs. Democracy***

*"Syria [is] one of several 'outposts of tyranny' in the world."*

—SECRETARY OF STATE CONDOLEEZZA RICE (*NEW YORK TIMES*, FEBRUARY 15, 2005)

Bashar Asad's ascendancy in Damascus in July 2000 prompted Western expectations of significant reforms in Syria. A British-trained ophthalmologist, Bashar had been exposed to Western notions of democracy and modernization. Two months before his "election" as Syria's president, Bashar gave an interview to the *Washington Post* and underscored his ties to Western culture and his commitment to introduce far-reaching reforms in Syria, although at a slower pace than that hoped for by the West. He also explained that democracy would be tailored to suit Syrian traditions. In his inauguration speech, he stated, "We cannot apply the democracy of others to ourselves. Western democracy, for example, is the outcome of a long history . . . we have to have our democratic experience which is special to us" (Syrian News Agency, July 17, 2000). During the first several months of his rule, Bashar permitted, or tolerated, fairly free "discussion of civil society" through newly created political forums, as well as the distribution of printed petitions by Syrian intellectuals calling for freedom of assembly, speech, and press. He also allowed the printing of new newspapers (one satirical), the opening of private universities, and the unrestricted importation of movies. These political overtures accompanied policies to reform and modernize the economy by introducing private banking, opening a stock exchange, and inviting foreign Arab investment, as well as by appointing Western-educated economists to senior administrative economic positions.



But this so-called Damascus Spring did not last long. While the new measures did not produce a significant improvement in the Syrian economy, Bashar, influenced by the conservative old guard, became concerned lest the political opening undermine his regime. In 2001, he ordered an end to political forums and the dismissal or arrest of intellectual activists, whom he labeled as “opportunists,” “Zionist spies,” and “U.S. agents.”

As it happened, the U.S. administration became increasingly interested in issues of democracy and reform in Syria only after the Iraq war, partly as a justification for eliminating Saddam’s regime. And since his reelection as president in 2004, Bush, as a would-be world reformer, has stressed the notions of liberty and freedom from tyranny and has added to his previous list of demands from Syria by calling for Bashar to respect these ideals.

If Bush during his current term of office continues to give priority to democratization and freedom from tyranny in Syria (and in the broader Middle East), the confrontation between Washington and Damascus is likely to become more intense. Bush may be morally and ethically right in his approach to these issues, but such an approach could be problematic. Even U.S. allies in the region—including the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—are reluctant to fully embrace such notions, lest their personal autocratic regimes collapse and be replaced by militant Islamic, anti-American systems. Furthermore, unless forced by U.S. military power, Bashar is not likely to relinquish his rule, his ballistic missiles (which he sees as his vital deterrent force), or his alliance with Iran.

## Prospects, Options, and Scenarios

Yet it would appear that President Bashar prefers to negotiate a deal with the United States than to further antagonize it. Such a deal would allow Bashar to stay in power, advance domestic reform with U.S. assistance, retrieve the Golan Heights from Israel, and establish constructive relations with the new Iraqi regime. In return, Bashar would make peace with Israel, give up his WMD—provided Israel reciprocates in kind—and disengage from Iran, as well as stop supporting the militants within Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad.

However, Bush has so far dismissed Bashar’s overtures and insists that the Syrian president must first accede to U.S. demands—which, of course, would mean that Bashar would have to give up his major assets and bargaining chips. It would appear that Bush, partly because of Bashar’s initially defiant and evasive conduct, does not want to deal with Bashar, and instead seeks to subjugate him—perhaps even to eliminate him. Backed by his new secretary of state, Congress, most of the media, and some think tanks, Bush seems to be determined to intensify his confrontation with Damascus. How practicable, though, is such a policy, and what dangers might it bring? And what are Syria’s options in this confrontation scenario?

### **Scenario I: Confrontation and Punishment**

*“For three transgressions of Damascus and for four, I will not revoke its punishment.”*

—AMOS 1:3

The United States has at least three options in pursuing an aggressive policy toward Syria: sanctions, military pressure, and occupation.

*Option A: Sanctions.* The United States can work to isolate Syria regionally and internationally, stepping up economic and diplomatic sanctions while endeavoring to promote domestic democratic opposition to Bashar’s regime. The aims of such a U.S. policy would be to bring about the collapse of Bashar’s regime, his capitulation and cooperation (along similar lines to the case of Libyan leader Mu’ammar Qaddafi), or a regime change in Damascus. Yet, economic sanctions, although painful, would not be very effective, since

***The U.S. administration became increasingly interested in issues of democracy and reform in Syria only after the Iraq war.***

***Bush may be morally and ethically right in his approach to these issues, but such an approach could be problematic.***

***It would appear that President Bashar prefers to negotiate a deal with the United States than to further antagonize it.***

***Bush, partly because of Bashar’s initially defiant and evasive conduct, does not want to deal with Bashar, and instead seeks to subjugate him—perhaps even to eliminate him.***

***Economic sanctions, although painful, would not be very effective, since the volume of Syrian-U.S. trade is small.***

the volume of Syrian-U.S. trade is small—about \$214 million in exports and \$259 million in imports annually (Alfred B. Prados and Jeremy M. Sharp, *Syria: Political Conditions and Relations with the United States after the Iraq War* [Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 10, 2005], p. 23). Syria's major trading partners are in Europe, and they are unlikely to impose either economic or diplomatic sanctions on Damascus. Indeed, despite U.S. requests to impose such sanctions, European countries, Russia, China, and several Arab states continue to maintain diplomatic relations with Syria.

In sum, U.S. sanctions, although damaging to the Syrian economy and Bashar's prestige, are unlikely to bring about Bashar's replacement, especially not by a democratic regime.

*Option B: Military Pressure.* The United States can exercise military pressures on Syria—by selective bombings or aggressive military incursions into Syria. Such measures may induce Damascus to change its policies on Iraq, Iran, WMD, and terrorism, as well as cause a regime change. Bashar might respond by adopting more effective measures to prevent Arab combatants crossing from Syria to Iraq; by further restraining Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah; and by announcing and partly introducing more reforms in Syria's economic and political systems. He would be unlikely, however, to relinquish his indirect influence in Lebanon, his WMD, his alliance with Iran, or his own rule by conducting fully free and democratic elections. He would be more likely to fall from power if the Alawi military elite were to see the introduction of such measures and reforms as a sign of Bashar's weakness and replace him with an uncompromising Alawi officer.

Another possible repercussion of U.S. military pressure on Syria is that it could consolidate Bashar's domestic backing and the support of Iran and Hezbollah for Bashar's regime. Such a U.S. policy might also unleash anti-American terror and worsen the United States' already unflattering image as a brutal power in the Arab and Muslim world and beyond. And if Washington chose secretly to encourage Israel to punish Syria for backing terrorist attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad by, for example, selectively bombing Syrian military positions, such action might damage further the American (and Israeli) position in the region and could undermine the U.S.-sponsored Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

*Option C: Occupation.* A third option is the U.S. occupation of Syria. This option has been periodically advocated by the more extremist factions in the current U.S. administration, by Congress, and by think tanks such as the Hudson Institute. If the United States were able to reallocate sufficient forces from Iraq and elsewhere, it could fairly easily occupy Syria, but it would be unable to control its population of eighteen million. The U.S. Army would be likely to encounter fierce insurgency in Syria as well as anti-American terrorist actions (by Hezbollah and, indirectly, by Iran) outside the country. The United States' image would be devastated in the Arab and Muslim world; it would be seen as a neo-"crusader" power occupying the "beating heart" of Arab nationalism and an important Islamic center.

As the preceding discussion of these three options has indicated, a policy of confronting Syria is unlikely to serve U.S. interests. It is certainly not in U.S. interests to push Bashar into cementing a militant axis with Iran and Hezbollah, thus promoting anti-American and anti-Israeli terrorism. Furthermore, the chances of pro-American democratic Syrian forces toppling Bashar's regime are very slim. The U.S.-sponsored Syrian Reform Party does not have much credibility among Syrians, and democratic elements in Syria are far too weak to cause a regime change. The strongest popular movements in Syria are Muslim militants and conservatives, and they are certainly not pro-American or pro-Israeli. The only group that can depose Bashar is the Syrian old guard, notably, senior Alawi officers such as Bashar's brother-in-law, General Asif Shawkat—but there is no guarantee that they would be more inclined than Bashar to accept Bush's terms.

### ***Scenario II: Engagement and Cooperation***

If, then, a confrontational policy poses significant problems for the United States, what about a policy of rapprochement?

***U.S. military pressure on Syria could consolidate Bashar's domestic backing and the support of Iran and Hezbollah for Bashar's regime.***

***The United States could fairly easily occupy Syria, but it would be unable to control its population of eighteen million.***

***The strongest popular movements in Syria are Muslim militants and conservatives, and they are certainly not pro-American or pro-Israeli.***

U.S.-Syrian rapprochement, based on mutual understanding and cooperation between leaders of the two countries, would likely become a win-win situation and serve the interests of Washington and Damascus, as well as of Jerusalem and other Middle Eastern centers. Such an outcome could only come about, however, under the following conditions.

- Bush does not insist on a regime change in Damascus, or on fully democratizing the Syrian political system, but is content with gradual reforms, such as those already partly instituted by Bashar, as well as with Syrian steps to safeguard human and civil rights, give greater freedom to the press, and create better representation of the Syrian people in state institutions.
- Bashar, as a confidence-building measure, initially commits himself to stopping his support for Iraqi insurgents, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad and to preparing his people for peace with Israel (other differences could be settled during subsequent U.S.-Syrian negotiations).
- Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon drops his refusal to renew the peace process with Syria and is prepared in principle to return the Golan Heights to Syria within the context of a full peace agreement with Damascus.

Peace with Syria would serve major interests for Israel: neutralizing Hezbollah as a military threat, limiting the activities of Hamas and Islamic Jihad (whose headquarters are in Damascus), helping to solve the Palestinian issue (for example, by settling in Syria the Palestinian refugees residing in Syria and Lebanon), and facilitating Israel's acceptance in the region.

For Syria, peace with Israel and cooperation with the United States would remove a dual strategic threat—from the south (Israel) and the east (Iraq). It would also expand Syrian trade with Iraq and, if U.S. financial help were forthcoming, significantly improve the Syrian economy. With a successful peace agreement, Damascus would no longer need Iran's support, would lose its rationale for developing WMD, and would have no reason to sponsor anti-Israeli terrorist groups.

For Washington, rapprochement with Damascus would include, in due course, erasing Syria from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism, and committing itself to helping Syria develop its economy. In return, Syria would contribute to the stabilization of Iraq—through political and economic cooperation between Baghdad and Damascus, by combating regional and international terrorism, and by weakening Iranian influence in the region. Syria thus could gradually become integrated into a U.S.-led regional strategic network contributing to peace, stability, and prosperity in the Middle East. It must be noted, however, that a stable and comprehensive settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with U.S. mediation is also an essential component of this new configuration—and could be advanced by a Syrian-Israeli peace settlement.

Yet there appear to be formidable obstacles on all sides to reaching such a mutually beneficial regional configuration. For example, is Bashar willing and capable of taking the bold steps required to disengage Syria fully from its relationships with Iran and Hezbollah—thus abandoning ideological tenets and tactical positions? Can Bashar “sell” peace with Israel and cooperation with the United States to his public and his conservative old guard, as his father did? Can Ariel Sharon convince a largely skeptical Israeli public to give up the Golan for peace with Syria, especially at a time when the major thrust of his policy is withdrawing from Gaza and part of the West Bank?

The answers to these open questions are largely in the hands of President Bush, who holds important cards as the leader of the superpower with significant political influence, vast economic resources, and the strongest military force in the region. Bush can, for instance, build upon the legacy of his predecessors, particularly that of Clinton, and persuade Israel to give up the Golan in return for full peace with Syria. He can offer to negotiate with Bashar a “framework for action and cooperation,” an offer Bush Sr. made to Asad Sr. in 1989. Bashar would probably accept, but Bush is not likely to take such a step.

***U.S.-Syrian rapprochement, based on mutual understanding and cooperation between leaders of the two countries, would likely become a win-win situation.***

***Peace with Syria would serve major interests for Israel.***

***Yet there appear to be formidable obstacles on all sides to reaching such a mutually beneficial regional configuration.***

## Conclusion: An Alternative, Incremental Approach

***U.S. policymakers should consider adopting a third approach to Bashar—one that is pragmatic and incremental, and that not only wields a big stick but also proffers carrots.***

***Differences have been overcome in the past. Under Asad Sr., Bush Sr., and Clinton, such cooperation occurred and a Syrian-Israeli peace was almost reached.***

***Bashar has attempted to improve relations with Washington, helping the CIA in arresting al Qaeda terrorists and intermittently preventing Arab guerrillas from crossing from Syria to Iraq. Bashar has also shown his desire to introduce economic and political reforms.***

Given, on the one hand, Bush's reluctance to engage Bashar openly in dialogue, and, on the other hand, the potential high risks of a confrontation with Syria, U.S. policymakers should consider adopting a third approach to Bashar—one that is pragmatic and incremental, and that not only wields a big stick but also proffers carrots. The aims of this policy would be to encourage Bashar's tendencies to carry out domestic reforms; to induce Bashar to stop backing anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli militant elements in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories; and to signal to Bashar that such constructive Syrian measures will be rewarded in due course by the lifting of U.S. diplomatic pressures and sanctions, as well as by the provision of U.S. financial support and U.S. involvement in negotiating the return of the Golan in exchange for peace with Israel. This incremental policy should be conducted mainly through back channels while employing also the influence and good offices of countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and France.

Such an approach may well prove to be the most realistic and workable way to avoid a U.S.-Syrian collision, which would be likely to destabilize the region and prejudice U.S., Israeli, and Syrian interests. This gradual, pragmatic approach can also bring about in the longer run a more productive relationship between Washington and Damascus, as will a peace agreement between Syria and Israel. Differences have been overcome in the past. Under Asad Sr., Bush Sr., and Clinton, such cooperation occurred and a Syrian-Israeli peace was almost reached. True, during that period the Iraqi issue played a different and more positive role in the U.S.-Syrian relationship, and the United States had not experienced a megaterror attack. But the United States had suffered a major terror attack in Lebanon in 1983, when the Syrian-sponsored Hezbollah bombed the U.S. Marine barracks in reaction to U.S. support for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Despite that attack, Washington and Damascus managed to cooperate regarding the pacification of Lebanon. Similarly, Israel and Syria fought each other in 1948, 1967, 1973, and 1982, but in the 1990s they seriously negotiated a peace agreement with active U.S. mediation.

Obviously, the current U.S. and Syrian leaders differ from their fathers in certain respects. Both are more ideologically motivated and influenced by conservative circles in their respective capitals. Bashar is a young and fairly immature leader who dared in 2003 to defy Bush, the leader of the world's only superpower, over the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Since then a psychological barrier has been erected between these two leaders. Still, Bashar has attempted to improve relations with Washington, helping the CIA in arresting al Qaeda terrorists and intermittently preventing Arab guerrillas from crossing from Syria to Iraq. Bashar has also shown his desire to introduce economic and political reforms in Syria, although he has not been inclined to democratize his regime fully, despite a request from Bush that he do so. Such a request is politically unacceptable as far as Syria and other Arab countries are concerned. Bush Sr. and Clinton demanded much less from Asad Sr., even though Asad Sr. was a far more brutal dictator than his son has proved to be. Bashar is more open-minded than his father and can be encouraged over time to further liberalize his rule and modernize his society. The alternatives to his rule may be worse as far as Washington is concerned.

In sum, a pragmatic incremental approach may give Bashar and Bush ample opportunity to change their initial attitudes and to better understand each other's concerns and may pave the way for significant bilateral cooperation based on common U.S. and Syrian interests.



**United States  
Institute of Peace**

1200 17th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036

[www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)