

Syria: Hanging Together or Hanging Separately

Within hours of Hafiz al-Asad's death on June 10, 2000, Syrian vice president Abdelhalim Khaddam designated Asad's son, Dr. Bashar al-Asad, chief of staff of the armed forces. On June 17, the Ba'th Party nominated him for president. The acceptance of Bashar by key Syrian political figures produced a palpable sense of relief throughout the region and as far away as Washington, D.C. After meeting Bashar, U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright announced, "I have the impression that the transition of power is taking place very smoothly."

The seamless transfer from father to son overcame the first obstacle of the Syrian leadership transition, but by no means the last. In many ways, the challenges are only now beginning. Will Dr. Bashar, as Hafiz al-Asad's son is known, be able to consolidate the power he needs to tackle Syria's international challenges? Weeks before his father's death, Israel dramatically altered the international environment by withdrawing from Lebanon. Domestically, can he breach the divide between the Syrian old guard and the Young Turk politicians and shore up Syria's crumbling economy? Days before Asad's death, important figures began challenging Bashar's growing power. Significant tension exists, if momentarily pushed below the surface.

The mourning period for Asad is likely to be a quiet one. But how events unfold in the next year is much less predictable than the current calm implies.

The issue of the Syrian leadership transition is a useful reminder of the existence and importance of the domestic political environment. Syria's many international challenges tend to obscure the linkage between domestic and international politics. Damascus has long-standing problems with the Ba'th regime in Iraq and sided against it in both the Iran-Iraq War and

Rachel Bronson is an Olin Fellow for National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. She wishes to thank Negar Katirai for contributing to this article.

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Operation Desert Storm. Ongoing problems with Turkey include a water dispute, support for anti-Turkish Kurdish factions, and irredentist claims on the Turkish province of Hatay. Turkish-Syrian hostilities culminated in 1998 with both countries mobilizing armed forces to their shared border. The Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and the takeover of Israeli outposts by Syria's proxy Hizballah is only the latest chapter in this 50-year conflict.

But foreign policy decisions do not take place in a domestic vacuum. Despite the dangerous international environment, the key concerns for the new Syrian government are Syria's collapsing economy and the minefield associated with fixing it. President Asad was able to manage the economic elite with a series of carrots and sticks. Bashar will have to renegotiate this relationship in a way that is likely to alienate many in the political and military establishment. The question of succession recognizes that Syria is more than a billiard ball reacting to other states. What happens inside Syria has important implications for what happens outside of it.

Syria's Stormy Past

Without understanding the tumultuous and unpredictable nature of Syrian politics throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it is impossible to appreciate fully the achievement of Asad's 30 years of uninterrupted rule and the risks Bashar inherits with leadership. A close examination of this period shows both the fractious nature of Syrian politics as well as the links between Syria's domestic and foreign affairs. Although domestic struggles continued after Asad took power in 1970, most notably the 1982 massacre in Hama, Asad was able to impose a measure of stability on Syrian political life that eluded previous leaders. It is this dichotomy between pre-1970 and post-1970 Syria that makes discussions of Syria's leadership transition so intriguing. Will Bashar be able to build on and benefit from the institutions and relative stability of the domestic environment of the post-1970s, or will long-suppressed demands return Syria to the pre-Asad years? Has the seemingly uncontrollable Syrian domestic scene been tamed, or is it simmering beneath the surface waiting to explode?

SYRIA BEFORE ASAD

Between 1946 and 1970, Syria was arguably the most unstable state in the region, experiencing regular *coups d'état*. Syria's leadership struggles reflected deep divisions between and among Sunnis and Alawis, land owners and the dispossessed, communists and noncommunists, those from Damascus and those from Aleppo, urban and rural dwellers, pan-Arabists and

nationalists, and others. The army during this time was politicized and rife with factions. As the noted scholar Patrick Seale stated, “The army became so fragmented, so much involved in the political process, that civilian-army boundaries were lost in the vast intricate struggle of the pre-Union [1958] years.”

Party, army, and class rivalries exploded onto the Syrian political scene. These rivalries affected the economic, social, and foreign policy orientation of Syria. Egypt and Iraq were heavily involved in Syrian domestic politics, supporting their domestic allies over the others. Syria threw itself toward Egypt and then Iraq, depending on who was in power at the moment in Damascus and from where primary international support was coming.

During this time, domestic politics significantly influenced foreign policy. The 1958 union between Egypt and Syria has generally been viewed as the natural outgrowth of Arab nationalism. Although the ideology of pan-Arabism clearly played a key role in the union, it was Syria’s tumultuous domestic political scene that drove its direction. The union was largely orchestrated by the Syrian Ba’th Party, who incorrectly believed it had more to gain from union than its domestic rivals. Mistakenly, the Ba’thist leaders believed that union with Egypt would result in Egypt’s president Nasser cracking down only on the Ba’th’s political opponents.

With union, Syria’s traditional power brokers lost power. Nasser’s harsh rule not only reduced the strength of contending parties but also denied the Ba’th the key domestic positions it expected in return for orchestrating Nasser’s takeover. (Hafiz al-Asad, a young airman, was saddled with a desk job in Cairo.) The union was dissolved in 1961.

Throughout the 1960s, internecine conflict continued between the Ba’th and its rivals and eventually within the Ba’th itself. Nasserists looked to Egypt for assistance, whereas the Ba’th tended to court Iraq. The military, never far from the surface, became an even more vocal and present feature in Syrian politics. A letter from a British foreign officer captures well the desperation of this time. He records:

It is somewhat wearying to be gazing continuously into a clouded crystal ball, trying to make sense of a situation constantly in flux. ... One reason certainly is that the Syrians themselves do not know [what is going on] because the situation changes from week to week. Behind everything stands the army which determines events. It is itself divided and the balance of power there changes very frequently owing to repeated dismissals of groups of officers.

By the end of the 1960s, the Syrian political landscape was littered with the

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charred remains of party politics. The military wing of the Ba'ath party was the only faction left standing. Having lost significant territory, equipment, and regional standing in the 1967 war, Syria was in a state of shock. Hafiz al-Asad, head of the air force and defense minister, resolved to avoid a repeat of the disastrous loss of 1967 and began looking for ways to temper the Syrian domestic environment. When in 1970 President Saleh Jadeed sent forces into Jordan to aid Palestinians in the Jordanian civil war, Asad withheld air cover, leaving Syrian advancing forces exposed, necessitating retreat. Asad's move conveyed the weakness of his superior and enabled him to assume the presidency in what is referred to as "the corrective movement."

SYRIA UNDER ASAD

If the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by unpredictability and severe domestic turmoil, the Asad years were characterized by predictability and stability. Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch argue that, under Asad, Syria "in effect metamorphosed from a plaything into a player." Some

have claimed that by the 1970s factions and rivalries had been exhausted, suggesting Asad all but walked into a more stable period. But Asad's political imprint is significant, and his ability to balance factions within Syria, co-opt when possible and crack-down when necessary, was by no means foreordained. In the early 1970s, he supported an economic liberalization strategy that co-opted important sectors of society. He brought into power many Sunni leaders such as Mustafa Tlas and Hikmat Shihabi, although Sunni power was

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always circumscribed by key Alawi figures.

The early period of Asad's rule emphasized liberalization and co-optation, but brute force was never far from the surface. Syria's human rights record is dismal, one of the worst in the region. Asad's policy of repression was especially evident in his battle against Syria's Muslim Brotherhood between 1979 and 1982. The Brotherhood, a Sunni organization, provided a particularly difficult challenge to Asad's regime, which was, and still is, largely Alawi, a (contested) minority Shi'a sect. The Brotherhood was able to attract not only those who desired a more religious state but also many who were simply opposed to minority rule. In a bloody crackdown in the city of Hama in 1982, military force unleashed against the Brotherhood resulted in thousands of civilian deaths. In Hama, Asad made clear that he was willing to use overwhelming force to control the fate of Syrian domestic

politics. The Brotherhood's military wing has been largely destroyed, but the social aspect of the Brotherhood (the provision of charity, education, social services, and so forth), continues to this day. Indeed the Muslim Brotherhood could arise as a key player once again if any struggle emerges during Bashar's consolidation.

To ensure stability, Asad created a number of overlapping intelligence services, each responsible for tracking different elements in society and, just as important, one another. The Ba'th party continues as an important pillar of control permeating Syrian society from the smallest village up through the president himself. Asad also built up several different defense organizations including the regular army as well as a Republican Guard tasked to defend the regime. During the 1970s, Asad empowered his brother, Rifat, to oversee the "defense industries" to counterbalance the regular military. Through these defense industries, Rifat was able to build up a cadre of loyal military followers to orchestrate a coup against his brother in 1984.

In the hospital with a heart condition during the winter of 1983–1984, President Asad turned over temporary command of Syria to a small committee of long-trusted associates. Rifat and a number of Asad's rivals challenged the arrangement by moving troops and heavy weapons into Damascus. As the president recovered, he quickly regained control from his brother and banished him to Paris. Rifat's failure led to the dismantling of the defense industries and further consolidation of Asad's power.

Bashar and Beyond

Hafiz al-Asad's ability to tame domestic rivalries was clear. Bashar has inherited a monumental task. Although Asad was determined to groom his son for leadership, Bashar does not inspire the same fear and confidence that Asad once did. He will need to rely on seasoned subordinates such as his brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, to consolidate power. The Syrian power elite, known as the Alawi Barons, will play an important role in determining whether Syria is characterized by chaos or stability. They know from the 1950s and 1960s that only by "hanging together" will they retain their domestic position. History shows that internecine conflict quickly politicizes the larger Syrian body politic and provides windows of opportunity for others to make their demands heard. If the power elite can unify around Bashar and avoid competing for power with one another, they will keep out peripheral groups. If they doubt Bashar's abilities or his legitimacy, which many do, and if they are unable to work together, other previously marginalized parties will join the fight for power. This could plunge Syria into the chaos of an earlier period.

The contours of potential power struggles are emerging. To be successful,

Bashar will need to tame the existing divisions between the old guard and his younger supporters. He will also need to stifle claims to power from groups outside the ruling establishment, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. It will be a difficult task, riddled with pitfalls and challenges. Several scenarios are possible.

SCENARIO I: BASHAR SUCCESSFULLY CONSOLIDATES POWER

Through the years, Asad has expressed confidence about a smooth power transition, arguing that the Syrian constitution and the Ba'th Party would ensure it. At the same time, he discredited these same institutions in order to empower his sons. Until 1994, it appeared that Asad's son, Basil, a military officer with considerable support and charisma, would be Asad's natural successor. After Basil was killed in a car accident, Asad anointed his second son,

Bashar, an ophthalmologist living in England, his heir apparent. Bashar had not been prepared for leadership, and, unlike his brother, he enjoyed only limited domestic support. By moving so quickly from Basil to Bashar, Asad revealed that neither competency nor experience was a key requirement for succession. To protect Bashar from the disillusionment that this necessarily produced, Asad engaged in a six-year effort to develop Bashar's skills as well as

The key concern for the new Syrian government is the collapsing economy.

his power base. Asad's departure from an institutionally guided power transition to hereditary rule, so late in his tenure, reintroduced an unpredictability into Syrian politics that had been stamped out 30 years ago.

In preparing for leadership, Bashar quickly moved through military, party, and government ranks. Militarily, he received a dizzying set of promotions. In 1994, he was made captain, one year later major, and in 1996 he was promoted to lieutenant colonel, taking over the Lebanon portfolio from long-term handler Vice President Abdelhalim Khaddam. Overseeing the 22,000 Syrian troops currently stationed in Lebanon is one of the key Syrian military positions because it has served as a proxy for the Israel-Syria conflict since the early 1980s.¹ In January 2000 he was awarded the rank of colonel, and in June he was made a three-star general and commander-in-chief of the Syrian armed forces.

Perhaps most crucial was Bashar's rise through the Ba'th Party. Before his death, Hafiz al-Asad planned for Bashar, in mid-June, to be elected to the Regional Command of the Ba'th Party, the most important organ of the party. The Syrian constitution makes the Regional Command a stepping stone to power, and Bashar's election to this body was largely seen as the

pinnacle of his rise. Pro-Bashar candidates were also expected to be elected to the command, all but ensuring Bashar's eventual assumption of the presidency. Even before Asad's death, one Syrian analyst noted that "the June election will mark the end of the Hafiz al-Asad era." After Asad's death, this convention served as a vehicle for nominating Bashar for president.

Yet it is by no means clear that Bashar will have the support he needs to rule Syria effectively. When Asad died, Bashar was neither a general nor of legal age to qualify for the presidency. On the day Asad died, the constitutional age for assuming the presidency was changed from 40 to 34, Bashar's age. These glitches in his eligibility have not been lost on prospective challengers. Many key people, who devoted their lives to creating contemporary Syria, see little virtue in patriarchy. The Republic of Syria, after all, is a republic, not a monarchy. Ali Haydar, former head of the special forces, was pushed aside after articulating to Hafiz al-Asad his reservations about hereditary succession—that Bashar has not put in the time nor does he have the experience to rule.

SCENARIO 2: POWER BROKERS MANEUVER BEHIND THE SCENE

Even if Bashar does not himself inspire confidence, however, the institutions that Asad helped mold over 30 years may encourage a stable transfer of power. One noted expert, Volker Perthes, argued in 1995,

In the maintenance of stability and in a smooth transition, there is a chance that these institutions—parliament, government, and the judiciary—may develop and play their role more fully. ... One should not preclude that in order to prevent chaos and destruction, Syria's military and security strongmen ... could respect constitutional rules.

In this scenario, Bashar would play a senior role, with key figures using their legal positions to run the country effectively.

Toward the end of his life, Hafiz al-Asad became increasingly wary of the contending powers to Bashar and weakened the very institutions that could both challenge him and provide for Syria's stability. In an attempt to legitimize his son, Asad neutered the very institutions he created by circumventing them and undermining the men who once served within them.

Since 1994, key heavyweights within the regime lost their positions, such as Muhammad Khuli, air force commander; Adnan Makhluaf, head of the Republican Guard; and Ali Duba, military intelligence chief. Hikmat Shihabi was forced to retire from his 24-year role as chief of staff. Vice President Khaddam was transferred from running Syria's Lebanon policy to maintaining Syrian-Iranian relations. Prime Minister Zu'bi was targeted in Bashar's anticorruption program after 13 years in the position.

Over the years, President Asad had stocked key institutions with men

loyal to Bashar. Men such as Ali Aslan, chief of staff of the armed forces, and Assaf Shawkat, head of the Republican Guard—and Bashar’s brother-in-law—are considered in this light and serve in key security roles. At the political level, Bashar had significant influence over allotting cabinet positions in the most recent turnover.

Asad’s approach was contradictory in that he relied on institutions to confer legitimacy on his son yet subverted those same institutions by ramming Bashar through them. Challenging these institutions will be the men who once benefited from them. The Alawi Barons, who have manipulated Syrian politics from behind the scenes, remain powerful figures. But they are now split between the old guard and the Young Turks. Just days before Asad’s death the old guard visibly demonstrated its existing strength and its ability to push back on Bashar’s authority.

The institutions that Asad helped mold may encourage a stable transfer of power.

General Hikmat Shihabi, the veteran chief of staff of the armed forces, was targeted by Bashar’s anticorruption campaign. Shihabi escaped through Lebanon, where he was formally sent off by senior Lebanese officials such as Khaddam; Rafik Hariri, the former premier; and Walid Junblatt, the Druze leader. This is important as a symbol. Bashar’s control of Lebanon is not absolute, despite owning the Lebanon portfolio for several years. The old guard signaled that it

would not allow one after another of its own to be targeted for corruption. Just days before Asad’s death, the Arab press was full of discussion about Bashar’s control of the situation and the possible showdown between the old guard and the Young Turks of Syria as a result of Shihabi’s flight. Questions were being asked, such as what was the role of Ghazi Kanaan, the current head of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon. Did he turn a blind eye, or did he willfully go against the wishes of Bashar? What control over events did former intelligence chief Ali Duba have? That the contours of this showdown emerged only three days before Asad’s death highlights the existing tension in the regime.

Although on the surface the transition may proceed peacefully, considerable uncertainty exists. The key question is whether the elite power brokers will be able to remain united around Bashar in the long run, when inevitable differences emerge. If they do not, a politically unstable and polarized Syria will emerge and open political space for other individuals or organizations to compete for power.

SCENARIO 3: COUSIN STRUGGLES AGAINST COUSIN

One wild card in the competition for power is the role to be played by Bashar's uncle Rifat and cousin Sumer. After Rifat's attempt to take power in the mid-1980s, his power base appeared to be effectively diminished—enough so that Hafiz permitted his brother to return to Syria in 1992.

Although the power struggle between the two brothers largely appeared to be over, the struggle between the next generation continues unabated. Although Rifat no longer struggles for power for himself exclusively, his son Sumer has actively built on his father's relationships in an attempt to challenge his cousin Basil and later Bashar. In the late 1990s, Sumer's ANN, a satellite television station operating out of Europe, ran a series of reports critical of the Syrian government. President Asad sent messages and imprisoned a number of low-level officials to signal his concern and disapproval to Sumer. Sumer and his father were emboldened rather than deterred. Rifat became the first politician to visit Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika after his election. In August 1999, Sumer met with Palestinian Authority president Yasir Arafat, his uncle's long-time rival. The meeting was broadcast throughout the Arab world and prompted a particularly vicious response from Asad's long-time defense minister, Mustafa Tlass. After these incidents, Asad cracked down strongly on Rifat, Sumer, and their followers. A running gun battle ensued between their supporters and the government in October 1999 after many of Sumer's supporters were imprisoned and the government closed down an illegal port maintained by Rifat. If there was any question of Sumer's power and his ability to inspire a challenge against Bashar, it was largely answered in October on the streets of Latakia—the base of the Asad's power.

Although it is unlikely that Sumer will be able to mount a serious challenge to Bashar, Rifat seems tirelessly to attempt to disrupt an orderly power transition. Rifat's announcement to the Lebanese press, two days after his brother's death, that he would return to Syria at the appropriate moment to challenge the presidency was met by threats of his arrest from the Syrian regime. Sumer will not have the power to challenge Bashar directly, but he will be one of the many obstacles Bashar will confront in his new leadership role. How to co-opt or constrain Sumer and Rifat will be a continual challenge because each is likely to be a force operating against the ability of the power elite to hang together in the long-term. The role Sumer chooses to play bears watching.

SCENARIO 4: OTHER ACTORS BECOME POLITICIZED

If Bashar is unable to consolidate his power quickly, and if the group around him permits differences to harden into factions, there will be opportunities for more peripheral groups to seek power. Many groups have been suppressed

since Asad came to power and many are waiting to exact retribution. There always remains the chance that one person will attempt to claim power. Who this person may be is unknown, for it is not in his interest to tip his hand now. The number of intelligence services operating in Syria makes it unlikely that any one person would be able to mount a significant challenge without being recognized and effectively shut down, but the possibility always exists.

Should the group around Bashar fail to coalesce, actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood may attempt to exploit it to their advantage. Ali al-Bayanoni, general guide of Brotherhood in Syria, hinted before Asad's death that,

In the event of a split in the top echelons of the military and the security services, and if the struggle filters down to the streets, it seems there'll be a breach in the barrier of fear that keeps the public silent today, and the crumbled divisions of the [Brotherhood] will regroup.²

The key question is whether elite power brokers will remain united in the long-run.

Asad was attuned to the potential power of the Brotherhood in the future leadership transition. Shortly before his death, there were indicators that he sought to trade easing restrictions on the Brotherhood in return for the group's support of Bashar. This deal, it seems, was motivated by Rifat's reportedly having grown a beard and seeking better relations with the organization.

The social network that the Brotherhood has built could be used as a political platform in the future. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria continues to nurture relations with the Brotherhood in Jordan, Egypt, and by some indications Iraq, and therefore will both influence and be influenced by these ties. A struggle for the religious soul of Syria will fundamentally change both Syrian and regional politics, and the possibility cannot be discounted if the power elite does not stick together.

Private-sector actors will also attempt to increase their power in successive governments because Syria's economic future largely depends on their success. Should the Alawi Barons fail to co-opt them in a successful manner, and should they begin fighting among themselves, the Damascene private sector could become a powerful counterforce against the ruling establishment.

If power devolves to the Brotherhood, the Sunni dispossessed, the economic elite, and others are likely to become increasingly politicized. In such an environment, it is unclear who, if anyone, could reimpose the level of stability that Syria knew under Asad. Perhaps outside powers will try to influence outcomes. In such circumstances, Syria in 2000 may look more like Syria in 1950 than Syria in 1990.

SCENARIO 5: OUTSIDE INTERVENTION

The worst thing that could happen to Syria is outside intervention by neighboring states. International actors could seize on polarized Syrian domestic politics and return Syria to its pre-1970 period. The Brotherhood is a natural conduit. Its connections in Jordan and Egypt could provide each state the ability to influence domestic events. Worse, rumors of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood holding its annual meeting in Iraq augur poorly for Syria's future. Iran has vested interests in the direction Syria evolves, as does Egypt and Israel.

Implications

Succession in Syria would be difficult enough in a peaceful and predictable environment. Significant challenges confront Syria and will continue to do so in the post-Hafiz era. Bashar will have to establish his *bona fides* quickly on both economic and foreign policy issues. Such challenges, particularly economic ones, have the potential to polarize key power brokers.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

One key issue that is likely to cause dissension among the Syrian power elite is the state's role in the economy. Syria's economy is in shambles, and its population is growing rapidly. To open the country to much needed foreign direct investment and to liberalize the economy, new social alliances will need to be constructed. Asad's strategy had been to co-opt the business elite in return for political quiescence. But, given the sorry state of the Syrian economy, Bashar will need to reconfigure this relationship. He will need to work more closely with the business class if Syria is to do anything but limp along economically.

Bashar's reputation as a Western-oriented man, seeking to lead Syria's younger generation toward greater economic achievements and technological sophistication, is promising. But history shows that as the Syrian regime requires more from the business class, its role in politics increases. Since the late 1980s, the business community has become more active. The small Syrian private sector has increasingly argued on behalf of limited reforms, as the government relies on private-sector funds. In addition, Bashar will quickly find that Syria can no longer depend on its traditional sources of revenue—foreign aid and oil. Foreign aid, particularly from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, is unlikely to increase, and the price of oil is likely to decline in the long term. In such conditions, the role of the private sector will be increasingly important.

Incorporating the private sector will challenge the business elite that has benefited from the strong role of the state. Throughout the 1990s, Asad experimented with ways both to increase private investment and to shield the public sector. But the poor performance of Syria's economy demonstrates the difficulties associated with this dual-track strategy.

Bashar has not put in the time nor does he have the experience to rule.

If given freedom to maneuver, Bashar will likely establish new domestic alliances with the private sector. He has committed himself to improving Syrian access to technology and exploring ways to better integrate Syria into the global economy. But many of the old guard power brokers will not be receptive because they have the most to lose if and when new constituencies are incorporated. It is not a foregone conclusion that they will accept a new

governing alliance in which the *bourgeoisie* is allowed a more powerful role. Indeed, many left-leaning Ba'thists and Communists have spent much of their careers opposing commercial influence over politics. Others, who have abandoned their ideology and profited from the public sector, will also lose if the private sector is given preference. The success of a new leader in addressing Syria's economic problems will depend on the leader's ability to work more closely with the new capitalist class. Will the group around Bashar support a reorientation in the economic sphere? Will the struggling business class in Syria accept anything less? As if anticipating the profound challenges of this potential struggle, shortly before his death Asad pushed through a number of measures liberalizing the economy. Bashar will have to shore up strong alliances with the business community quickly and decisively if he plans to take on the older power brokers around him. If he chooses not to, there will be increased domestic discontent as Syria drifts away from the benefits of the new global economy.

THE PEACE PROCESS

With events unfolding so quickly in Lebanon and Syria, it is difficult to anticipate where the region will be tomorrow, let alone months from now. Lebanon has served as a buffer zone between Syria and Israel, with each supporting different Lebanese factions in an ongoing proxy war. Syria supports Hizballah (and permits Iranian assistance by allowing the transfer of equipment from Tehran through Damascus), whereas Israel backed the Southern Lebanese Army. With the Israeli withdrawal and subsequent collapse of the Southern Lebanese Army, the buffer zone between Syria and Israel has disintegrated. Hizballah forces are now directly on Israel's north border, and Israel has made

clear it will hold Damascus responsible for their behavior.

There has been much speculation about how succession relates to the peace process. One school of thought argues that, because of his domestic position, Asad preferred a long, drawn-out process with no intention of obtaining peace. Given the minority makeup of the regime, the ongoing state of war helps legitimize the government in the eyes of the people. With peace, the Asad regime would need to tackle pressing economic and social challenges for which it does not have satisfying answers. Allowing the conflict with Israel to drag on year to year helped maintain the regime's authority to rule. This logic would imply that succession is unlikely to affect the regional peace process if Bashar follows the same strategy. What was good for Asad will be at least as good for Bashar, because he will need to legitimize himself in the eyes of the Syrian populace.

Bashar will need to rely on seasoned subordinates to consolidate power.

But this view ignores the moves toward peace taken by Syria. Asad did make efforts to slowly prepare the people for peace. When a deal looked likely with Ehud Barak's government, pictures of smiling Israeli leaders appeared on Syrian television. In addition, less vicious articles about Israel appeared in the newspaper. Asad cracked down on radical antipeace groups to prohibit them from disrupting negotiations. Progress has also been made on nonterritorial issues.

There is a second school of thought that argues that domestic politics drove Asad's approach to peace. With the issue of succession so prominent in Asad's mind, he needed to be flexible so as not to saddle future leaders with this complex issue. But, at the March meeting in Geneva between the Syrian and U.S. presidents, it became clear that Asad was unwilling to accept anything less than the complete return of the Golan Heights even in the face of the succession issue. Thus succession did not figure as prominently as many assumed.

The truth lies somewhere between. The Syrian leader had been actively seeking the return of all the Golan Heights consistently since coming to power in 1970. Because he was the defense minister in 1967 who lost the Golan, its return would have balanced his legacy in Syrian history. Contrary to the first school, Asad did not prefer the process to peace. But, unlike the second school, he believed that a less than perfect deal would be challenging for future leaders to manage and thus not prudent. The dilemma for the new Syrian government is how to walk this fine line or else muster the substantial support necessary to deviate from it.

Bashar's inexperience in military affairs is a significant hurdle given the current state of the Israeli-Lebanese situation. Immediately after the Israeli withdrawal, those close to Asad indicated that he planned to keep the Israeli border "at a low boil" until the Golan was returned. Syria explored its contacts with Hizballah and rejectionist Palestinian groups in the West Bank and Gaza. Asad's deft control of Hizballah suggested he would continue to use it in a similar way in the future. It is unlikely that Bashar can amass the authority and ability to toe such a dangerous line. His supporters, as well as elements of the old guard, will be instrumental in helping him control the situation. But it is not certain that even they will have the authority to manipulate Hizballah with the same success as Asad. Managing arms flows from Hizballah to the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the evolving relationship between the three, will prove to be one of Bashar's first real international challenges.

Conclusion

There are real opportunities for Syria after Hafiz al-Asad. Bashar's ascendancy marks the continuation of a generational shift that is happening throughout the Middle East, in places such as Bahrain, Qatar, Morocco, and Jordan. King Abdullah of Jordan has shown that the younger generation can maneuver in ways the previous generation of Middle Eastern rulers could not. Jordan's improving relations with Syria suggests that this new generation may be able to transcend the deep rivalries that years of personalistic rule produced.

Bashar's youth, exposure to the West, and commitment to economic and technological reform may be, for this reason, what Syria needs right now. There already appears to be some loosening of media restrictions. New governmental alliances with the private sector would help provide the young Syrian population with the opportunities so desperately wanted. The late Asad, a Ba'th party member from post-independence Syria, was schooled in a socialist ideology wary of capitalist change. Perhaps his son can move the country past the late president's socialist policies toward a more integrated economy.

Unlike countries such as Jordan, Morocco, and Bahrain, Syria is not a monarchy, and thus legitimacy is not automatically transferred to the ruler's son. Institutions such as the Ba'th Party have played an important role in defining power, and long-serving power brokers expect to have a say in the country's future. Bashar will need to fight for legitimacy and establish his ability to rule. His success will largely depend on the tight group of military and security elite that surrounded his father.

Hopes that Syrian institutions will restrain violent infighting are harder and harder to substantiate as a result of Asad's many purges of traditional power brokers. The very same institutions that might have provided stability have been recently discredited because more and more pro-Bashar men were put into positions of power each year.

Although many of the power elite in Syria are skeptical about Bashar's abilities and question his legitimacy, the potential pitfalls accompanying dissension are severe. A polarized Syria could lead to a purging of the entire power structure. Battles over leadership, if not contained, could animate previously disempowered groups. In the 1950s and 1960s, such politicization produced violent and unpredictable politics. The fear of returning to such a period, in which the Alawis will likely lose, may be enough to induce the elite to coalesce and unify behind Bashar. It is likely to do so in the short run. But will it contain conflicts in the long run? Is fear of instability enough? The answer to this question is what will determine Syria's future path.

The worst thing that could happen to Syria is outside intervention by neighboring states.

Notes

1. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1999–2000* (London). Some analysts indicate the number of troops to be as high as 35,000.
2. Ehud Ya'ari, "The Extreme Scenario," *Jerusalem Report*, February 28, 2000.