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Raymond A. Hinnebusch

Syria after the Iraq War:
between the neo-con offensive and internal reform

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Autor/Author
Raymond A. Hinnebusch is Professor of international relations and Middle East politics at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. He is the author of several books on Syria and on the international politics of the Middle East including *Authoritarian power and state formation in Ba'thist Syria: Army, party and peasant*, Westview Press, Boulder, Col., 1990; *Syria and the Middle East peace process*, with Alasdair Drysdale, Council on Foreign Relations Press, Washington, D.C., 1991; *The Syrian-Iranian alliance: Middle Powers in a penetrated regional system*, with Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Routledge, London, 1997; *Syria: Revolution from above*, Routledge, London, 2001 and *The International politics of the Middle East*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003.

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Summary

The US invasion of Iraq has heightened the threat to Syria from the US neo-cons who aim to deprive it of its remaining cards in its contest with Israel over the Golan Heights. The war on terrorism has put the spotlight on the safe haven given by Syria to militant Palestinians, its support for Hizbollah, and its non-conventional weapons capability, while Syria's stand against the invasion of Iraq enabled the neo-cons to paint Syria as a US foe. The US invasion of Iraq damaged important Syrian interests and would have been opposed by any Syrian leadership. Post-invasion US demands on Syria threatens its most vital interests, including its deterrent against Israel, its role in Lebanon, and its Arab nationalist legitimacy. Syria is trying to make the minimal concessions to the US needed to disarm the neo-cons without wholly surrendering to its demands. Damascus portrays itself a indispensable to stability and a peace settlement in the region. External pressures on Syria have delayed rather than accelerated internal reform but Syria's impending accession to the Euro-Med partnership may unblock the process.

Introduction

At a time when reform in Syria was incrementally advancing, but the reforming president had yet to consolidate his power, the US invasion of Iraq much heightened the threat to the Syrian regime's very survival. Washington's "Neo-Conservative" offensive was by no means targeted exclusively at Saddam Hussein's regime but sought to redraw the map of the Middle East. While their aims were legitimized in terms of fighting terrorism, they made little secret of their desire to use American power to benefit Israel and control the region's oil reserves: after the conquest of Iraq and the submission of nearly every Arab regime to US dictates, Syria remains one of the last obstacles in the way of the neo-cons' new Middle East imperium.[1] Sandwiched between Israeli military power in the East and the Americans to the West, the Syrian regime's survival requires it play its few remaining cards with the utmost skill.

President Bashshar al-Asad's defiance of Washington, in striking contrast to the appeasement of virtually every other Arab leader, is both a legitimacy asset and a security liability. While his reforming image and relatively good relations with Europe are crucial to shielding the regime from neo-con hostility, the defiant role assumed by Syria would not appear to be backed by strength at home. The loyal opposition asked to be included in a national unity government to strengthen Syria against the external threat, but an elite under siege from without declined to simultaneously risk political change from within.

1. Syria between state formation and environmental pressures

The broad parameters of Syrian behaviour are shaped by an interaction between the accumulated change-resistant interests which Syria's historic path has institutionalised in the regime and the internal contradictions and external pressures that push toward change.

Syria's state formation, an outcome of the imperialist imposed break-up of historic Syria and the Zionist settlement of Palestine, produced one of the most durably revisionist orientations in the Ottoman successor states. The Syrian Ba'th party rose to power on a wave of middle class and peasant Arab nationalism inflamed by this damaging experience. The consolidation of the Ba'thist regime was accompanied by the concentration of power in the hands of military officers headed by Hafiz al-Asad, who, disproportionately from the minority Alawi community, had to defend their legitimacy by being seen to champion the Arab nationalist cause they shared with the Sunni majority. Syria's loss of the Golan Heights in the 1967 war further locked it into the struggle with Israel to recover this territory.

Under Asad, Arab nationalism was institutionalised in the authoritarian structures of a semi-Leninist state which gave the president the autonomy to modify Syria's revisionism in the interest of raison d'état; this, even if not always popular in Arab nationalist eyes, served Syria's ability to more effectively balance against Israeli power. The centrepiece of Asad's strategy was his concentration on the recovery of the Golan through some mix of military and diplomatic means. In the 1970s Syria engaged in the peace process; when this failed, Asad used the Hizbollah movement against Israeli occupying forces in southern Lebanon to extract a cost from Israel for its unwillingness to negotiate land for peace. Syria also added a

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[1] Patrick Seale, "Why are the US and Israel threatening Syria?", *al-Hayat,* April 18, 2003; Ali Shukri, "The Syrian factor", Open Democracy Ltd, April 17, 2003. Needless to say the new empire would be an *indirect* one, based more on client regimes and the threat of intervention than the more costly form of administered direct empire, but, for all that, arguably even more damaging. See Karl E. Meyer, The dust of empire, New York: Century Foundation, 2003, who observes that: "Direct foreign rule tends to unite a subject people, their resistance forging a sense of nationhood, while indirect rule de-legitimizes indigenous leaders and creates a despised class of collaborators" (pp. 26-27).

"Palestinian card" to its diplomatic hand by harbouring militant Palestinian organizations in Damascus.

Until the nineties, Syria's Arab nationalist orientation was sustained by Soviet arms and protection that balanced American support for Israel and deterred Israeli power. Requiring resources far beyond the capacity of Syria's domestic economy, this policy also depended on substantial aid accessed through alliances with the Arab oil states and Iran. However, the end of the Cold War and the nearly simultaneous 1991 Gulf War transformed Syria's external environment into one sharply hostile to the continuance of its Arab nationalist foreign policy. Syrian elites have been struggling for a decade to adapt themselves to this new reality. Now unable to access large amounts of foreign rent or balance between the superpowers, the Syrian regime began to 'bandwagon' with, i.e. appease the US hegemon, partly in order to balance the greater threat from Israel and enlist US support for a diplomatic settlement: hence, it joined the 1991 Gulf coalition and the Madrid peace process which brought Syria and Israel close to a "land-for-peace" settlement.

At the same time, the stagnation of the state-dominated economy amidst declining external aid, combined with a burgeoning population, translated into an erosion in GNP/capita. Syria's 2.6%/year population growth was above the middle income country average while its $1,010 per capita income in 2001 had fallen behind that average; its very low domestic savings rate of 10.4% and domestic investment rate of 17% were insufficient to renew sustained growth. Although periodic rent windfalls and Syria's petroleum exports provided buffers against immediate economic crisis, elites realized that the only long-term solution was an opening to the world capitalist market. The regime had for some time experimented with economic liberalization meant to revive the private sector, encourage exports and access external, especially expatriate, investment; but the accumulated stock of FDI in 1998 was only 8% of Syria's total GNP.[2]

There were, in fact, formidable obstacles to a transformation in Syria's state-dominated economy. The main constituencies of the regime, in particular the politically dominant Alawis, were dependent on the state sector and extracted rent from state regulation of the economy, while their rivals − the Sunni business − class dominated the private sector. To be sure, business and marriage alliances were amalgamating parts of these groups into a new bourgeoisie profiting from private business; but this class continues to be rent-seeking, exploiting state-granted import monopolies and contracts that would be threatened by the competition unleashed by a more open and transparent market. Other obstacles to integration into the global economy include the "social contract" − under which regime legitimacy is contingent on state provision of subsidized food, jobs in a large public sector and farm support prices. Historically Syria has refused to conform, on nationalist principle, to externally-dictated (IMF) structural change. The ability of the regime to dispense patronage − the "loyalty system" on which it rests − would have to adjust to withdrawal of the state from the economy. Moreover, private investment depends on a stable, pacific investment climate requiring a settlement of regional conflicts. Only this would permit the dismantling of the rent-dependent national security state and an easing of the bureaucratic obstacles and lack of rule of law with which it was associated. Reformers saw a solution in a gradual economic integration with Arab trading partners and with Europe combined with an influx of expatriate and other foreign investment following on a regional peace settlement.

It was widely expected that the declining sustainability of the status quo would make the leadership change upon the death of President Hafiz al-Asad a watershed releasing pent-up pressures for change. Bashshar al-Asad was seen as representative of a new generation with a vision of 'modernisation' that entailed economic liberalisation, a reduction of rent-seeking

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[2] UNCTAD, *World Investment Report*, New York: UN, 1999; World Bank, "Country Brief", New York, 2001.

corruption, and an opening to the West. However, Bashshar's inheritance of a state constructed by his father whose associates remained in office meant his Presidential power was checked by several centres of power − the party politburo ("Regional Command"), the cabinet, the army high command and the security forces − in which the old guard retained influence and with which the new President had to consult and share power. Bashshar, putting a favourable gloss on what some saw as deadlock, argued that he was not a dictator who could impose a predetermined road to reform; rather he had to work through institutions in which various interests legitimately had different and (since none had all the right answers) valuable perspectives. His job was to synthesize these views into a decision and push for its implementation in a process of incremental but continuous reform; his main obstacle was the lack of trained cadres to implement the new reform laws which often remained on paper.[3]

Bashshar nevertheless started to adapt the statist system to the age of globalization through an anti-corruption campaign and appointment of reforming technocrats to government, by restricting the interference of the party and security forces in economic administration, and by passing legislation creating the framework for a more market oriented economy − including the approval of private banks. But he made no direct assault on the new class of "crony capitalists", − the rent-seeking alliances of Alawi political brokers (now led by his own mother's family, the Makhloufs) and the regime-supportive Sunni bourgeoisie − whose corrupt stranglehold on the economy deterred more productive investment. Bashshar's incremental reform was not enough to encourage the significant new private investment needed to kick-start the economy.

While Bashshar initially encouraged civil society to express constructive criticism, seemingly in an effort to foster forces which would strengthen his own reformist agenda, when this threatened to snowball into a wider critique of the regimem − including the legacy of his father (from which he derived his own legitimacy) and when it threatened to put the spotlight on the corrupt activities of regime barons, the old guard and security forces insisted Bashshar rein in the opposition. This shut off a potential route by which he might have restored the regime's faltering legitimacy and consolidated his power on behalf of reform. Inevitably, therefore, Bashshar's strategy was necessarily one of incrementalism: retiring the old guard as it aged and promoting a younger generation in the army and security forces which was personally beholden to him. It was, however, unclear whether these "young Turks" were more friendly to the reforms he wanted than were the old guard.

What also deterred more substantial change was the hostile external environment: the failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace process at the March 26, 2000 Clinton-Asad Summit, the consequent deterioration of relations with the US, the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifadah and the rise of the hard-line Sharon government in Israel. With a peace settlement off the agenda and with it the prospect that economic liberalisation might rapidly rescue the economy, the regime opted to hedge its bets by pursuing two alternative strategies, one, a long-run deepening of economic and diplomatic relations with Europe, the other a shorter term fix through an economic opening to Saddamist Iraq. However, the events of 11 September, in stimulating a new and assertive American interventionism in the area, concretised in the invasion and occupation of Iraq, shut down the latter survival strategy, making the former more vital to the regime. While this, in principle, should accelerate reform at the economic level, the threats from Washington have deterred it at the political level.

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[3] Interview with Syrian President, nytimes.com/2003/12/01.

2. The neo-con offensive against Syria

Under Hafiz al-Asad Damascus had been ambivalent toward the US: it was both Israel's main backer and the one state in the post-Cold War period which could restrain Israel and conceivably broker an acceptable Syrian-Israeli settlement. As such, Damascus has sought both co-operation with Washington and the alternative alliances needed to balance against it.

What had once been fairly good relations fostered while Syria was in the peace process, started to deteriorate when this failed even though the accession of the younger Asad was welcomed in Washington. However, under the second Bush administration, the US-Syrian relation qualitatively worsened. Syrian and US interests sharply diverged as Bush sought to isolate Iraq, in preparation for his planned invasion, while Syria was realigning with Baghdad and receiving Iraqi oil outside the UN oil-for-food regime. Particularly after September 11, the US became insistent that the offices of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, responsible for suicide bombings in Israel, be closed; Damascus resisted but sought to appease the US by "assisting" its war on terrorism through intelligence exchanges. Syria took heart from Bush's initial stand against the Syria Accountability Act being proposed in congress, in Washington's seeming tolerance of Syria's Iraqi oil imports and a semi-official "dialogue" organized by the Baker Institute.

But adjustment of interests with Washington became increasingly difficult as the mostly-Pentagon-based "neo-cons" rose in influence. Intimately associated with the Israeli Likud party, they had advocated the use of sanctions or force against Syria even before reaching government. September 11th gave them new opportunities to paint Israel's foes as America's foes. Thus, they obfuscated the distinction between Hizbollah which threatened Israel and al-Qaeda which threatened the USA. More than that, they promoted a pro-Israeli imperial project in the Middle East. If the main contradiction in US Middle East policy had always been the need to qualify US support for Israel enough to sustain the Arab alliances that ensured access to oil, the neo-cons proposed to cut through this conundrum. They would adopt the Likud's expansionist agenda while side-stepping the need to accommodate Arab interests by using America's overwhelming military force to seize Iraq's pivotal oil fields. Using Iraq as a base, Washington would be able to intimidate or coerce remaining resistance − from Syria and Iran − to imposition of a pro-Israeli Pax-Americana. To be sure, US moderates concentrated in the middle ranks of the State Department, CIA and other government agencies were sceptical about aggressively confronting Syria which was proving a useful ally in the war on terrorism. However, the neo-cons were happy to sacrifice the benefits of Syrian co-operation to the pursuit of their Likudist agenda. Making no distinction between Israeli and American interests, they seemed intent on destroying common ground between Syria and the US, isolating Damascus diplomatically, and deploying economic sanctions and military threats or action to bring down the regime.[4]

As the neo-cons' star rose amidst Washington's initial military successes in Iraq, their focus turned to Syria. At the height of their triumphalism, they seemed on the verge of using Syria's hostility to this venture to get support for a military attack on Syria. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld, his deputy Wolfowitz and others launched a campaign of accusations against Syria for supporting resistance to the invasion.[5] The US bombed the Syrian trade centre in Baghdad. One of the first US acts in Iraq was to shut down the oil pipeline to Syria that had been so important a revenue earner for Damascus in the past years. Bush, queried as to whether US forces would now turn on Syria, answered that "Each situation will require a

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[4] Jim Lobe, "Bush stance on Syria hit shows neocons still hold sway", *Interpress Service*, October 8, 2003; *Middle East International* (MEI), London, November 21, 2003, p. 25; Seymour Hersh "The Syrian bet", *New Yorker Magazine*, July 27, 2003 and *New York Times*, February 6, 2004.

[5] *MEI*, July 25, 2003, p. 7.

different response, first things first; we expect co-operation from Syria".[6] Even moderates such as Colin Powell now sought to use the threat posed by the US military presence in Iraq to make major demands on Syria. At the outbreak of the war he told an *American-Israeli Political Action Committee* (AIPAC) conference that Syria would bear the consequences if it did not abandon its support for terrorism and the dying regime of Saddam Hussein. That Powell even bothered to visit Damascus after the US victory irritated the neo-cons, even though he arrived full of demands − to expel militant Palestinian factions, dismantle Hizbollah, withdraw from Lebanon, and co-operate with the occupation regime in Iraq. Rumour had it that he went further in demanding the handing over of Palestinian leader Ahmad Jabril and of retired Syrian security bosses Muhammed Khouli and Ali Duba. These demands struck at Syria's most vital interests − its cards in the struggle over the Golan, its sphere of influence in the Levant, its Arab nationalist stature in the Arab world, its stability at home. No Syrian government could accede to them except under the direst and most imminent threat. Moreover, American demands were presented in a triumphalist style certain to inflame resistance. Powell told the US press that "there are no illusions in [Bashshar's] mind as to what we are looking for from Syria" and that Washington would be watching his performance. Symptomatic was a State Department remark ahead of Powell's visit to Damascus that "We're not coming bringing any carrots". Foreign ministry spokesperson, Bouthiana Shaaban responded that Syria was willing to contribute to regional solutions but could not bear to be dictated to by the US. Co-operation requires "real engagement on a parity of dignity".[7] In June, a US raid inside the Syrian border, in which Syrian troops were captured and taken to Iraq, kept up the US pressure on Damascus.

Syria tried to adjust to the daunting new geopolitical context it faced: with US power on the ground in Iraq and its Arab client regimes appeasing Washington's every ambition, Syria tried to disarm the neo-cons, notably by closing its border with Iraq. Temporarily, Washington reduced its anti-Syrian rhetoric with Bush stating that Syria had got the message that it needed to cooperate. However, the neo-cons, subsequently put on the defensive by the failure to find non-conventional weapons in Iraq and by the resistance there to the occupation, sought to divert attention from these failures by blaming them on Syria.[8] By the summer of 2003, Washington was claiming that Syria has not complied with its demands and levels of tension were described as reaching a "Syrian-American crisis".[9] Although the borders with Iraq were closed, although Syria had not opposed the so-called "road map" to Middle East peace which excluded it at Israeli's behest, although Hizbollah, under heavy pressure from Syria and Iran, had largely refrained from challenging Israel in southern Lebanon, and even though Palestinian factions had closed their Damascus offices, Syria's effort to initiate a dialogue were rebuffed. Anders Strindberg reports that diplomats in Damascus believed this stemmed from a desire to humiliate Syria for its opposition to the invasion of Iraq.[10] In addition, the president's outspoken opposition to the war and the alleged involvement of some of his close associates in pre-war arms shipments to Iraq undercut the ability and willingness of Washington moderates to argue that Bashshar was a reformer deserving of support. William J. Burns, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs opined that "Syria harbors the illusion that cosmetic steps will be enough to defuse our concerns... from a misplaced belief that U.S. engagement in Iraq and with the Israelis and Palestinians will prevent us from pursuing a robust agenda with Syria." Burns acknowledged that Syrian cooperation against al-Qaida earlier in the war on terrorism was valuable and saved American

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[6] *MEI*, April 4, 2003 pp. 9, 25.

[7] *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003; *Federal News Service*, June 18, 2003.

[8] *MEI*, November 21, 2003, p. 25

[9] Walid Choucair, "The Syrian-American crisis", *al-Hayat*, August 1, 2003.

[10] Anders Strindberg, "America's nonsensical Syria policy", *MEI*, July 25, 2003.

lives but it was not sufficient to outweigh Damascus continued support for other terror groups − i.e. those contesting Israel's hold over occupied Palestinian territories.[11]

The so-called "WMD" issue typifies the neo-con attempt, not merely to contest specific Syrian policies but to threaten Syria's most vital security interests and to manufacture a Syrian-American crisis. Although Syria's chemically armed missile force is a purely defensive deterrent crucial to its security against a vastly superior nuclear-armed Israeli military; and although, far from posing a threat to anyone, it is a key factor in the balance of power that has maintained two decades of peace on the Syrian-Israel border, the neo-cons repeatedly tried to paint Syrian capabilities as a threat to stability in the Middle East and to the US itself. Under-secretary of State John Bolton − who famously assured Ariel Sharon that after disarming Iraq, the US would go after Syria and Iran − claimed that Syria was not only developing chemical and biological weapons but was seeking nuclear relevant technologies: "There is no graver threat to our country today than states that both sponsor terrorism and possess or aspire to possess weapons of mass destruction". Without any evidence at all, the neo-cons also alleged that material from Iraq's weapons program had been transported to Syria. The CIA and other agencies raised strong objections to Bolton's line since he had acquired a reputation for twisting or falsifying the facts on behalf of the neo-con agenda.[12]

Although the neo-cons were deploying the same "weapons of mass deception" they had so successfully employed against Iraq, Syria, unlike Iraq, had never used chemical weapons and was in violation of no security council resolutions demanding its non-conventional weapons disarmament. By contrast to Israel, which is in violation of UN Security Council resolution 487 calling on it to place its nuclear facilities under the trusteeship of the International Atomic Energy, Syria is a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has "accepted the full scope safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency".[13]

In response to the neo-con campaign, Foreign Minister al-Sharaa ruled out any weapons inspections on Syrian territory, but announced that Syria was prepared to turn the Middle East into a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction under UN supervision. Syria submitted a draft resolution to that effect to the Security Council but Washington was not interested. The neo-con aim was to force a unilateral disarmament on Syria, leaving it wholly open to Israeli power and vulnerable to an Israeli dictated peace settlement.

Indicative of the continued power of the neo-cons was the so-called Syria Accountability Act which, initially opposed by the White House, received its approval in autumn 2003. A coalition of AIPAC, the rightwing fundamentalist Christian coalition and followers of the Maronite ex-General Aoun pushed it through congress. No witnesses opposing the bill were allowed to testify in the hearings on it, with only the likes of Aoun and Likudist crusader Daniel Pipes having their say. House Majority Leader Tom Delaney's claim that Syria was waging a war on the civilized world and was a threat to all free nations exemplified the quality of congressional discourse. As Zunes put it, the act "is so filled with hyperbole and double-standards that it undermines its own credibility. In fact, its real purpose may be to demonise a government whose main offence appears to be its refusal to support the Bush administration's foreign policy agenda in the Middle East."[14]

The bill imposes a ban on sales to Syria of 'dual use' technology and also authorises the president to select further sanctions from a list of six. These include an export ban, a ban on US businesses in Syria, restrictions on Syrian diplomats in the US, exclusion of Syrian aircraft from the US, a reduction of diplomatic contacts with Syria, and the freezing of Syrian

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[11] Burns, "Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee", Washington, DC, October 30, 2003.

[12] *International Herald Tribune*, July 19, 2003, p. 3; October 30, 2003, p. 5; *MEI*, November 21, 2003, p. 25.

[13] *Cairo Times*, April 24-30, 2003; Stephen Zunes, "The Syrian Accountability Act and the triumph of hegemony", *FPIF Policy Report*, October 2003.

[14] Zunes, "The Syrian Accountability Act"; *MEI*, May 30, 2003, pp. 17-18; December 19, 2003, p. 32; Hussein Ibish, dailystar.com.lb, September 26, 2003.

assets in the US. The president is also empowered to waive these measures for six-month periods for national security reasons and the effect of the bill, as Bashshar al-Asad commented, "depends on how President Bush implements it". But as one analyst warned, the act sets out a host of excuses for war if that is what Bush wants.[15]

Syria is buffered from US sanctions in the short term by a relatively healthy geo-economic position. Revenue from rising oil prices and a bumper agricultural season produced growth of 3.3% in 2002. Syria's foreign currency reserves, the third largest among Arab countries, stand at a healthy USD 12-17 billion, a good part of it proceeds from Iraq pipeline profits. Foreign trade is in surplus and debt servicing modest. There are huge new gas fields awaiting exploitation; this, however, depends on foreign capital and technology that could be deterred by the US sanctions. Syria's oil and telecommunications sectors could also have to switch from American-made equipment and several US oil companies have joint ventures with Syrian firms or have signed oil exploration and production deals that could be affected. But the bill did not deter Canadian and Russian oil firms from signing new contracts with Syria's oil ministry.[16]

3. Syria's ambivalent responses to the US threat

In the period after Bashshar al-Asad's succession, Syria's foreign policy elite seemed united and its diplomacy astute. Bashshar accelerated the policy began under his father of mending regional fences and diversifying ties with a multitude of states, successfully extracting Syria from the isolation with which its principled stand in the Arab-Israeli conflict periodically threatened it. But in confronting the current US threat, it has appeared less sure-footed. In the absence of Hafiz al-Asad's unchallenged hand at the helm of state, governance by an untested president and a fructuous collective leadership, has, amidst unprecedented pressures from without, issued in policy inconsistencies and uncertainty. The outrage at US behaviour in public opinion − from which the policy process was insulated by Hafiz's realpolitik − has welled up through the fissures in the regime and made regime legitimacy incompatible with submission to American dictates; yet, the regime's survival interests dictate some accommodation with Washington.

Incoherence in Syrian policy was manifest in policy zigzags and paralysis. The absence of Syria's delegate from the vote on UNSC Resolution 1483 may have been due to a dispute between Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa, backed by much of the party who opposed the resolution as legitimising the invasion, and the president who did not wish to put Syria outside the security council consensus and ultimately acted unilaterally. Syria's ineffectualness and mixed messages in response to the Israel air raid in October suggested an inability to co-ordinate policy at the very top. According to critic Fayez Sara "It used to be [under Hafiz] that the president said something and it happened. Now you hear the president saying something, the foreign minister saying the opposite." There is, he claimed, no strategic thinking, only ad-hoc reactions to events.[17]

US pressure does seem to have generated conflict within the elite, as it was arguably meant to do, although this has not hardened into clear factions. No one proposes surrender to all US demands. But Bashshar wants to prevent Syria becoming incompatible with US ambitions in the region and hopes to exploit differences within the US administration by making some concessions and keeping a dialogue open with Washington. Some of the old guard and elements in the security services also advocate concessions if the US would lift its

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[15] *MEI*, November 21, 2003, p. 25; December 5, 2003, pp. 19-21; nytimes.com/2003/12/01.

[16] The Oxford Business Group, "Online Briefing", October 29, 2003.

[17] *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003

seige of the regime. Foreign Minister al-Sharaa, convinced that the extremist neo-cons are in control in Washington, sees little room for accommodation with Washington; his blunt if undiplomatic language has won him respect at home but may have made him a diplomatic liability. Some powerful Alawi businessmen criticized his open antagonism toward the US and, except that Washington was demanding it, he might well have lost his position.

The accommodationists, led by the president, seek to impress on (nearly absent) counterparts in Washington that in principle there should be no contradiction between Syrian and US interests. The prevention of terrorism requires a stable regional order and a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and this cannot be achieved except through US cooperation with stable, nationally legitimate regimes such as Syria's. Syria's pacification of Lebanon, once of source of regional instability and terrorism, its readiness for peace with Israel, its secular multi-communal model, its successful elimination of violent Islamic fundamentalism at home and its intelligence co-operation against terrorism should make it a natural US partner. What obstructs co-operation, in their view, is the unbalanced ideological policy followed by the US that, through its unqualified support for Sharon and its invasion of Iraq, serves Israeli interests and, in actually inflaming terrorism, is at odds with its own national security. Bashshar observes that there is a division in the US between the rational element that understands US interests and with whom Syria hopes to reach accommodation, and the irrational element in the Pentagon that does not consider the consequences when acting. "The only problem between us and the United States is the Israel issue", he insists. Bashshar may have received the impression from US officials that co-operation would bring rewards and some of his advisors would like to offer further concessions but find it politically impossible to do so when Washington offers nothing in return. Indeed, because previous concessions were followed by increased pressure, they are perceived to merely encourage Washington's policy of demands.[18]

Many Syria officials and analysts seemed to despair at the capture of US policy by what they see as the extremist and anti-Arab racist "neo-conservative gang that surrounds President Bush". Al-Sharaa famously responded to US unwillingness to be satisfied with Syrian concessions after the invasion of Iraq:

> "The external pressure applied to Syria is the heaviest it has ever faced [The Americans] are impressed only by those who bow down before them. The administration of President Bush is exceptional. Perhaps there have been similar administrations in the past, but never one at the same level of violence and stupidity...Time after time, the U.S. violates international legitimacy. ..."[19]

In a lecture to the National Progressive Front (of pro-regime parties) al-Sharaa argued that Syria's post-Cold strategy had linked its security to international legitimacy in a world which was seemingly moving toward security based on international law; this however, had been premature since the US was pursuing a policy of overt imperialism in alliance with Zionism that was overturning the rules of world order. Defence Minister Mustafa Tlas pointed out that while US behaviour was responsible for much of international terrorism, it absolved itself by blaming Arab regimes.[20] Even Bashshar al-Asad observed, as the US invaded Iraq, that the Americans "removed their masks and said that they wanted oil and that they wanted to re-draw the map of the region in accordance with Israeli interests." [21]

Nevertheless, analysts close to the regime seem to believe that, in principle, Syria can steer a middle way between unrealistic defiance of US power and surrender to its dictates. They believe Syria retains enough bargaining cards, namely its centrality to an Arab-Israel peace, to regional stability, to containing terrorism and to restraining Hizbollah with its proven

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[18] *Middle East Media Research Institute* (MEMRI), May 30, 2003; *MEI*, May 16, 2003, pp. 17-18; *International Crisis Group* (ICG), "Syria under Bashar" (I), p. 5.

[19] *MEMRI*, July 29, 2003

[20] *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 10, 2003.

[21] *al-Safir*, March 27, 2003.

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ability to hurt Israel. Bashshar told American audiences that if there is no co-operation between Syria and the United States on these issues it was going to be very difficult to achieve any of them. Syria would co-operate with the US where they shared interests while preserving the right to refuse submission to demands that damaged its interests.

Syria realizes that the viability of this strategy depends on whether Washington's difficulties in Iraq bring it to the realization that its military power does not nullify its need for co-operation in the region and that co-operation depends on mutual respect based on sovereignty. Syrian elites also cling to the view that the US cannot as readily resort to military force against Syria as it did against Iraq because Syria does not violate international legitimacy, is not subject to international sanctions, and, far from isolated, has diverse alliances at the regional and international levels. Syria has little oil wealth to fund a US occupation and no opposition that would collaborate with the US. Syria would continue to distinguish between its real enemy, Israel, and the US, which it hoped would return to its traditionally more balanced policy.[22]

As will be shown in the following analysis, in practice, Syrian policy has responded to the US threats in two ways, incremental concessions meant to mollify the moderates and Bush himself and to avoid giving the neo-cons a *causus belli* while tenaciously defending Syria's vital national interests; and secondly a diplomacy of diversifying ties in order avoid the international isolation that allowed the US to target Iraq.

4. The invasion of Iraq

Syria and Iraq

Why did Syria give the neo-cons an opportunity to paint Syria as an enemy by opposing the US invasion of Iraq? Some pundits blame the President, arguing that he sought to assume his father's legitimacy as leader of Arab nationalism yet lacked the acumen of Hafiz who had managed to put Syria on the winning side of the 1991 US-Iraq conflict. But opposition to the US was a collective decision that would have been taken by any nationalist leadership in Damascus. Not only did the invasion threaten vital Syrian interests in Iraq but it was also an egregious affront to the Arab nationalist values so ingrained in Syrian thinking: if in 1991, Saddam was the aggressor, in this instance, as Syrians saw it, an Arab state was the victim of a predatory imperialist power serving Israeli interests.[23]

Even before Bashshar's accession, Syria had begun a rapprochement with Iraq motivated by geo-politics: the failure of the peace process made Hafiz look for alternative alignments and, as Vice President Khaddam pointed out, Iraq was a strategic hinterland for Syria in its conflict with Israel. The end to Syrian-Iraqi hostility, a regional constant for decades, held the potential to transform the region's power balance to Israel's detriment.

But, especially under Bashshar, the relation was chiefly driven by geo-economics. Syria's receipt, via the newly re-opened Iraq-Syria pipeline, of Iraqi crude at below market prices, enabling it to export an equivalent amount of Syrian oil at much higher international prices, earned a windfall profit of around $1 billion/year in revenue for the government. This was a crucial buffer against the declining viability of the statist economy that would allow the regime to pursue economic reform at its chosen incremental pace. In addition, pro-regime businessmen, (and their political patrons) acquired monopolistic contracts to provision the Iraqi market, refurbishing the regime's crony capitalist clientele networks.

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[22] Imad Fawzi Al Shuaibi, *al-Hayat*, July 13, 2003; *al-Hayat*, July 23, 2003.

[23] *The Financial Times*, April 17, 2003; Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the war in Iraq", *Meria Journal*, Volume 7, No. 2, June 2003; Anders Strindberg, "Iraq crisis threatens Syrian reforms", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Volume 15, No. 1, January 2003, pp. 38-41.

Syria's Iraqi oil arrangement, pursued outside of the UN sanctions regime and in defiance of Washington's failing efforts to maintain the isolation of Iraq, put Syria at odds with the Bush administration from its inception.[24] But it was Washington's determination to effect a regime change in Iraq that struck at the heart of Syrian strategic interests. It is possible the Syrian regime would have acquiesced in the removal of Saddam Hussein, for whom it had no love, if that would have given it an opportunity to use its ties with the Iraqi opposition and within the Iraqi Ba'th party, to ensure a friendly post-Saddam regime. If such a deal might have been possible with a different Washington administration, it was not with the neo-cons who sought to turn Iraq into a hostile pro-Zionist client state. Syria was also well aware that if the neo-cons were successful in Iraq, Damascus would, in one way or another, be next.

The failure of Syrian diplomacy

Through its position on the UN Security Council Syria stood at the nexus between the regional and global arenas and, in that capacity, attempted to build a coalition against war, in concert with Russia, France, and Germany in the Security Council, and through the Arab League. Syria voted in support of resolution 1441, mandating the renewal of United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq only to avoid a break with its Security Council allies and in the hope that this might deprive the neo-cons of their excuse for war.[25] In the Arab League, Syria invoked the *Arab Collective Security Pact* under which an attack on any Arab state should be considered an attack on them all; but, more realistically it merely urged that the war could be stopped if Arab states refused to allow their territory to be used to prosecute it (as Turkey impressed Arab public opinion by doing). However, an Arab League meeting in February 2003 ended in acrimony after Kuwait accused the Lebanese chairman (with Syrian urging) of steamrollering through a statement critical of Arab states hosting US forces preparing to attack Iraq. At the Arab Summit in Sharm al-Shaykh on the eve of the war, Bashshar asked the Arab rulers if they wanted history to say that Baghdad was destroyed twice, once by the Mongols due to a weak Abbasid Dynasty, and once at the turn of the 21st century, due to their weakness. Syria obstructed a Kuwaiti/Qatari plan to engineer Saddam's resignation, fearing this would be used to give the invasion Arab cover.[26] In his speech to the UN security council on the eve of the war, Foreign Minister al-Sharaa invoked the consensus of France, Russia, China and Germany that there was no justification for war, argued that the disarmament of any Iraqi weapons of mass destruction could be achieved through UN inspections with which Iraq was co-operating, and that international legitimacy had to be upheld against Washington's threat to launch an illegal war. Syria's UN Ambassador Mikhail Wehbe said he believed evidence presented by the US to the Security Council on Iraq's weapons had been fabricated.[27] Later, President Assad would argue that the UN inspections had made it obvious that there had been no WMDs in Iraq.[28] WMDs were a mere pretext and none of Iraq's neighbours felt it was a threat or wanted a war on Iraq. Syrian commentators explained that Israeli urgings and the interests of US companies who would profit from reconstruction contracts if Iraq was destroyed were the main forces behind the war.[29]

In a speech to the *National Progressive Front*, al-Sharaa admitted that Syrian diplomacy had failed: The US would go to war and Syria had little hope that Russia, China or Europe

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[24] Gary C. Gambill, "Syria's foreign relations: Iraq," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, March 2001, www.meib.org; Yotam Feldner, "Escalation games: Part II: regional and international factors between Washington and Damascus: Iraq", *MEMRI*, May 25, 2001.

[25] Strindberg, "Iraq Crisis... ".

[26] *MEI*, April 4, 2003, pp. 7-8; Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq"; *al-Safir*, March 27, 2003.

[27] The Oxford Business Group. "Online Briefing", February 10, 2003

[28] Interview, nytimes.com, 2003/12/01.

[29] Steven Stalinsky and Eli Carmeli, "The Syrian government and media on the war in Iraq", *MEMRI*, April 21, 2003.

could stop it. If the Arab states had been united and firm they could have deterred the US but the psychological state of the Arab regimes was so bad they are ready to submit to anything even though they would pay a price for defying their own people. As such, Syria had to rely on itself but, he admitted, internal contradictions weakened its stand. Al-Sharaa told parliament that the US was going to war in defiance of international law and the UN and that Syria had a national interest in the defeat of the invaders. Syria's Grand Mufti, Ahmad Kaftaru, urged Muslims throughout the world "to use all means and martyrdom operations to defeat the American, British, and Zionist aggression on Iraq". Some half a million Syrians protested the war in Damascus.[30] Bashshar, in his famous interview with *al-Safir,* observed: "No doubt the U.S. is a super-power capable of conquering a relatively small country, but...the U.S. and Britain are incapable of controlling all of Iraq."[31]

Between support for the resistance and neo-con threats

Syria did little to actually oppose the US invasion and to the extent it did, acted covertly, half-heartedly, and quickly backed away under US threats. Expecting that Iraqis would defend the regime for months, Syria apparently brokered arms sales to Iraq to bolster its defences against the anticipated invasion. A flow of several thousand resistance volunteers crossed the border into Iraq as war broke out; while the Syrian government did not engineer this it sent a mixed message, both officially discouraging it, yet, tacitly giving it the green light, not least in allowing the mufti's fatwa against the invasion. The regime was unwilling to stand against the tide of anti-American fury that swept Syria and although the volunteers came from all over the Arab world, the majority were from northern Syria. The business interests threatened by the invasion were concentrated there as well as the most militant Islamists ideologically aroused by it; moreover youth in the border communities were provoked by American incursions into Syria that followed the invasion.[32] Once the Saddamist regime fell, Syria apparently also gave refuge to some Iraqi officials fleeing Iraq.

However, under US threat, Syria officially closed its four official border posts with Iraq on 21 April. After that, Syria claims it neither allowed volunteers to exit Syria for Iraq nor allowed fleeing Iraqi officials to enter Syria. Neither did it comply with American demands to extradite such officials, although some were evidently expelled. Syria was unwilling to either deploy large troop numbers to police its 500 mile border or to dissipate its legitimacy through repression of the centres of resistance in the north of Syria. However, as US officials put it, although the Syrians "'were not going out of their way to stop" the movement of fighters into Iraq, the flow slowed to a trickle; in fact Syria increased its efforts to seal the border and even proposed joint patrols with US forces.[33] Secretary Burns acknowledged the porous nature of the Syrian-Iraqi border and the fact that Syrian tribes were extensions of those in Iraq fighting the occupation.[34]

Syria refused to accept the legitimacy of the US occupation. Resistance to occupation, Defence Minister Mustafa Tlas held, was a legal right. "The occupation was a danger ... to Arab national security and part of the US effort to shape the region against Arab interests. This new version of imperialism, like the old one before it, relied on exploiting ethnic and religious cleavages and the co-opting of profiteers."[35] Bashshar affirmed that Syria had to

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[30] Stalinsky and Carmeli, "The Syrian government"; Oxford Business Group, "Online Briefing", March 31, 2003.

[31] *al-Safir*, March 27, 2003.

[32] *MEI*, May 2, 2003, p. 13; *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003; *International Herald Tribune*, July 16, 2003, p. 6.

[33] *Washington Post*, October 29, 2003; ICG, "Syria under Bashar" (I), p. 19; *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* (MEIB), Volume 5, No. 6, June 2003; *MEI*, July 25, 2003, p. 7.

[34] Burns, "Statement".

[35] *al-Sharq Al-Awsat* , August 10, 2003.

support the people of Iraq against the US plan to efface its Arab and Muslim character but added: "I do not mean we should support the resistance with weapons. I want to make this point clear so that it will not be misunderstood."[36]

At the outset of war, Syria had announced that it would not co-operate with any puppet regime established in Baghdad. Syrian policy had necessarily to be more complex, however, if Damascus was to avoid isolation from its various allies who, for pragmatic reasons, were accommodating themselves to the US fait accompli. Thus, not wanting to be isolated from its Security Council allies at a time when it was under immediate threat from a triumphalist US, Syria reluctantly adhered to UNSC resolution 1483 which lifted sanctions on Iraq and, in effect, legitimized the occupiers' control of Iraq's oil money. More than that Syria even reached limited arrangements with the occupation and local Iraqi authorities that salvaged some of its previous stake in the Iraqi economy even though this helped stabilize the new order there. The Iraqi-Syrian railway was opened on July 30. A deal brokered by a US general was reached to provide electricity to Mosul and to trade Syrian petroleum products for Iraqi crude. According to Trade Minister Ghassan al-Rifai, trade with Iraq quickly revived after the war.[37] On the other hand, there were conflicts with the US over Iraqi assets that had been transferred to Syrian banks before the war. Syria denied they held anything like the $3 billion the US claimed and insisted it would only return Iraqi assets to a legitimate government. However, Syria did co-operate with US accountants seeking to trace the assets.[38]

Dealing with the US-installed *Interim Governing Council* (IGC) posed a particular dilemma. Syria refused to recognize the council's legitimacy, yet did not wish to break its links with elements in Iraq that, in their own interests, were to a greater or lesser extent, collaborating with the US occupation, notably the Kurds and some Shiites. A strategy soon became apparent of giving political (but not armed) support to the mainly Sunni Arab resistance while unofficially co-operating with other groups on the council with whom Syria had historic links. Sustaining links to a variety of Iraqi groups would be crucial for convincing Washington that co-operation with Syria was necessary for stabilizing Iraq.[39] It was also necessary for sustaining Syrian influence that would be needed in future to counter the client elites the US sought to install and leave behind once its overt occupation withdrew.

Yet in its details Syria's approach to the IGC seemed ad-hoc and inconsistent. It sought unsuccessfully to prevent the council's recognition in the Arab world: both the Arab League and OPEC allowed the council to assume Iraq's seats. Yet, Syria itself voted for UN Resolution 1511 that affirms the governing council to embody the sovereignty of Iraq in the transition until internationally recognised representative government is established and which calls on neighbouring states to prevent the transit of "terrorists" to Iraq.[40] If Syria's hosting of a November 2003 conference on security in Iraq with the foreign ministers if Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey and Iran was meant to engineer a consensus against the occupation regime, it also failed. The conference was itself a diplomatic coup against US efforts to isolate Syria but the assembled ministers voiced support for the council "in carrying out its transitional responsibilities until the formation of an elected and fully representative Iraqi government." Indeed, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan made attendance conditional on the "foreign minister" of the IGC being invited which Syria believed would confer undeserved legitimacy on it. Because Syria refused to extend the invitation which was, instead, made by Kuwait, the Iraqi official took offence and stayed away. At the same time, Syria openly received delegates of Sunni groups overtly opposed to the occupation including the "Central Council of the Sheikhs of Iraqi and Arab Clans" led by Ali Khalifah Muhammad

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[36] Bashar Al-Assad, Interview with Al-Arabiya, *MEMRI*, June 22, 2003.

[37] The Oxford Business Group, "Online Briefing", August 22, 2003; September 6, 2003.

[38] *The Times*, October 21, 2003; *MEI*, December 21, 2003, pp. 19-21.

[39] *The Times*, September 22, 2003.

al-Dulaymi, who condemned Iraq's "occupation by the Americans and the Jews" and a delegation of the Arab nationalist "National Unity Movement for Reform" that denounced the Governing Council as a creation of the occupation authorities. Syria's stance offended some of its old allies, such as Ahmad Talabani's *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan* (PUK) and the Shiite *Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq* (SCIRI).[41]

However, in anticipation of a possible partial restoration of Iraqi sovereignty, Syria edged toward normalization of relations with the governing council while stopping short of measures that would appear to legitimise the occupation. In December Bashshar received the head of the IGC without officially recognizing it. By the end of 2003, as debate raged in Iraq over the transition to self rule, Syria supported those, notably the Shia, demanding elections against the US attempt to manipulate the selection of an Iraqi assembly. Syria, Bashshar affirmed, would recognize Iraq when elected and autonomous, not imposed, institutions were in place.[42]

Syria hopes it may yet salvage an acceptable Iraqi outcome: if the resistance continues in Iraq, the US will be unlikely to take on Syria as well; if Iraq is democratised, Syria believes its relations with most key forces there may secure a friendly Iraq.[43] While certain old guard figures believe Syria should maximize political support for the resistance, Bashshar seeks the stabilization of Iraq, not only to open an alignment with the US moderates, but as a way of hastening the return of Iraqi sovereignty.

5. Syria and Israel

The neo-con quarrel with Syria was ultimately over its resistance to Israeli power in the region. Since the US, which used to play a certain mediating role between the two states, had wholly joined the Israeli side in the contest, Syria had to manoeuvre to protect its few remaining cards in the struggle.

The peace process

Syria has remained willing to resume the failed peace negotiations with Israel on condition that Israel acknowledged what Syria took to be the commitment made under Yitzhak Rabin to a full withdrawal from the Golan. This was defined as withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders, leaving Syria access to Lake Tiberias. But with the rise of Sharon to power, Israel was uninterested in reaching a deal with Syria over the Golan while its repression of the second Palestinian intifadah inflamed Syrian public opinion against it. As a result, Syria returned to its earlier insistence that a Syrian-Israeli settlement had to be part of a comprehensive one which included a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and preservation of the Palestinian right, under UN resolutions, of return or compensation.[44] At the post-September 11 Cairo Arab summit, where the Egyptians, Saudis and Jordanians all wanted to dampen down the intifadah to appease the US, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq called for keeping it going as a way of making the costs of Israeli occupation prohibitive.

The US-sponsored "road map", ostensibly meant to revive the peace process, but inspired by the need to prepare the political climate for the invasion of Iraq, ignored Syria. Bashshar pointed out that it also ignored UN resolutions 242 mandating Israel withdrawal from

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[40] *MEIB*, November 2003; The Oxford Business Group, "Online Briefing", August 22, 2003; *MEI*, October 24, 2003, pp. 8-9.
[41] *The Financial Times*, November 3, 2003, p. 9; *MEIB*, November 2003.
[42] nytimes.com/2003/12/01.
[43] Anders Strindberg and Mats Warn, "Syria, Hizbullah and the Iraqi dimension", *MEI*, June 13, 2003, pp. 27-29.
[44] *MEI*, April 6, 2001, pp. 7-8; July 13, 2001, p. 5.

occupied lands and 194 on the Palestinian refugees' right of return. The U.S., though claiming it was committed to a comprehensive peace including Syria and Lebanon, excluded them from the conference on reviving the "road-map" held at Sharm al-Shaykh in June 2003 on the grounds that they were not co-operating in the "peace process". According to al-Sharaa, "For the first time, the U.S. is trying to set conditions for Syria's entrance into the peace process", − evidently demanding expulsion of the Palestinian militant factions from Damascus, a cut off of support for Hizbollah and withdraw from Lebanon.[45] If so, the US evidently aims to deprive Syria of its diplomatic cards prior to engineering an Israeli designed settlement. Israel's former military intelligence chief Shlomo Gazit observed that Syria could not accept such pre-conditions which would mean "public surrender to Israeli-American dictates".[46]

Hoping to disarm the neo-cons, Syria has affirmed that it would not obstruct the road map and would agree to whatever the Palestinians agree to. Syria offered to resume negotiations with Israel at the point where the two had reached agreement under Rabin and Barak, "so as not to undo all that progress and go back to point zero". Bashshar may have privately conceded that negotiations could start without this pre-condition; Syrian demands for a simultaneous resolution of the Palestine issue also seem to have fallen by the wayside. Sharon, however, enjoying the full backing of US power, felt no need to enter negotiations that could only succeed by an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. The neo-cons believed peace and the Golan would be gifts to which Syria was unentitled but Bashshar warned that there could be no peace that was not comprehensive.[47]

The Palestinian militant factions

A major long-standing issue between the US and Syria has been the US demand that Damascus expel the militant Palestinian organisations that enjoy safe haven in Damascus, especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad which were carrying out suicide bombings in Israel. Syria long resisted on the grounds that their operational bases were in Palestine, and that they merely maintained information offices in Damascus. These offices represented Palestinian Diaspora opinion with a legitimate right to be heard, particularly in defence of the Palestinian right of return under UN resolution 141. After US Secretary of State Colin Powell's May 2003 visit to Damascus, Bashshar acknowledged that Syria had agreed to restrict the groups' activities, but implied that Syrian policy toward them would be dependent on Syrian inclusion in the peace process. Later, these groups ostensibly took it upon themselves to close their offices to relieve the pressure on Syria. The main faction leaders dropped out of public view and some may have left Syria although others apparently still enjoy safe haven. Syria cannot uproot the infrastructure of hospitals, schools and welfare services run by the groups which is deeply imbedded in the 500,000 strong Palestinian refugee community in Syria and whose inhabitants had legal rights to remain in Syria; it would also be loath to expend its nationalist capital by publicly expelling the leaders of groups identified with effective resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. [48]

In response to US and Israeli claims that Syria was supporting "terrorism", Syria insisted that the owners of occupied lands had a legal right of armed resistance upheld by the UN Charter. Bashshar asserted: "we are against killing civilians, but we cannot support a double standard" where one side is labelled terrorist while the occupier kills Palestinians in large numbers or an approach that "looks at the symptoms but ignores the cause of terrorism:

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[45] *MEMRI*, July 29, 2003; *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003.

[46] ICG, "Syria under Bashar" (I), p. 8.

[47] nytimes.com/2003/12/01/.No. 527; Al-Arabiya, *MEMRI*, October 5, 2003.

[48] The Oxford Business Group, "Online Briefing", May 16, 2003; *International Herald Tribune*, July 14, 2003 p. 3.

occupation and settlements."[49] None of this was enough for Washington and Burns attacked "Syria's refusal to seriously address this issue and sever ties with these terrorist organizations." According to some observers, the US campaign was more about silencing Palestinians' insistence on their right of return, which was likely to complicate the "road-map", than it was about stopping terrorist acts.[50]

Hizbollah and Lebanon

South Lebanon long served as a surrogate battlefield in a proxy war in which Syria was able to exert military pressure on Israel, at minimal risk, through Hizbollah attacks on Israel's so-called "security zone". After Israel's withdrawal from this, Syria's support for continued Hizbollah operations against the disputed Shebaa Farms enclave, which Israel still occupied, aimed to continue sending the message that Israel could not have peace without a settlement with Syria. But this was a risky policy after 9/11 and even more so after the US invasion of Iraq. Following several Hizbollah operations in April and June 2001, Israel bombed Syrian positions in Lebanon. Far from Washington restraining Israel, as it had traditionally done, Syria was now under US pressure to restrain or even dismantle Hizbollah which was labelled a terrorist organization. Syria sought to appease Washington by successfully maintaining calm on the Israeli-Lebanese border. Hizbollah went seven months without attacking the Shebaa farms until it responded in August 2003 to Israeli assassination of a senior Hizbollah leader.[51]

Under US pressure, Bashshar has claimed that, while Syria supported Hizbollah politically, it did not provide it with finance or arms.[52] Syria has not renounced its strategic partnership with Hizbollah: it is key to its ability to control Lebanon; it gives Syria legitimacy across the region to be seen standing with the Islamic resistance; Hizbollah has connections with Shiite forces in Iraq which it could use, in case of a US confrontation with Syria, to make trouble for the US occupation. Most important, Hizbollah's unique ability to hurt Israel is Syria's most effective deterrent against the Israeli military and its best card in any future negotiations over the Golan.[53]

The neo-cons had a more ambitious agenda than targeting Hizbollah and were keen to push Syria out of Lebanon. The so-called *Syria Accountability and Restoration of Lebanese Sovereignty Act* showed how far these forces had managed to remake US policy, which had initially welcomed Syria's pacification of Lebanon and its ouster of the rogue, Saddam-supported general, Michel Aoun. However, the more moderate Colin Powell, while insisting that Syria was an occupier in Lebanon, has merely expressed hope that "the day will be reached when, with the agreement of all the parties, the Syrian Army will be back home." According to Aounists, "the prevailing perception in Damascus is that US calls for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon are primarily intended to bring about Syrian concessions on other issues."[54]

Syria has responded to these pressures by continuing its gradual redeployment of troops from Lebanese cities to the Bekaa valley or to Syria, reducing troop numbers in Lebanon from 30,000 to 18,000. This appeased mainstream Maronite opponents yet did not weaken Syria's position since it rests on its Lebanese clientele network and intelligence apparatus more than on military force. Syria's policy helped produce broad opposition to the US legislation in Lebanon that even included the traditionally anti-Syrian Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir. According to Mohammed Raad, leader of Hizbollah's parliamentary group,

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[49] nytimes.com/2003/12/01

[50] Strindberg, "America's", *MEI*, July 25, 2003.

[51] *MEI*, July 16, 2003; August 22, 2003.

[52] nytimes.com/2003/12/01

[53] Strindberg, *MEI*, June 13, 2003.

[54] *MEIB*, July 2003.

"The act is part of a campaign by Israel to re-ignite internal conflict in Lebanon .... Patriarch Sfeir has realised the danger of this."[55]

The Israeli air raid on Syria

In October 2003, the Israel air force raided a camp near Damascus of the nearly inactive Palestinian faction, the PFLP-GC. This followed two earlier attacks on Syrian positions in Lebanon and an Israel over fly of Bashshar's summer residence in Latakia, the first violation of Syrian airspace since 1982. The Israeli air raid inside Syria was yet another escalation, further undermining the old rules of engagement under which Syria and Israel had not attacked each other directly for three decades.[56] Even more a change in the "rules" was that the US, far from condemning the attack (as did other world powers), approved it as an escalation of pressure on Syria to comply with its demands. Bush's statement that Israel should not feel constrained in "defending itself" contained an implied threat that more was to come.[57]

Israel's claims that it had targeted a training camp for suicide bombers hardly stood up to scrutiny since the PFLP-GC had not been involved in these and had actually signed on to the "road map". The attack inflicted heavy damage on nearby Palestinian housing. Robert Fisk remarked: "Do Palestinian suicide bombers really need to practice suicide bombing? Does turning a switch need that much training? Surely the death of a brother or a cousin by the Israeli army is all the practice that is needed."[58] With the failure of massive repression in the occupied territories to halt suicide bombings, attacking Syria was widely seen as Sharon's effort to relieve domestic pressure and to force the Arab states into acting against militant Palestinians. A defiant al-Sharaa warned that Syria could easily target Israeli settlements on the Golan Heights if Israel repeated its attacks on Syria. Bashshar remarked: "We are not a superpower, but we are not a weak state either. We're not a country without cards."[59] In fact, Hizbollah responded to the raid with an operation in southern Lebanon.

6. Syria's defensive diplomacy

Key to whether the neo-cons will be able to isolate and demonise Syria, force it to submit or justify war against it, is the policy vigorously pursued by President Bashshar al-Asad of maximising Syria's regional and international ties.

Regional relations

Close ties with Syria's regional neighbours had been prioritised by Bashshar since coming to power. He inherited an emerging Turkish-Israeli-Jordanian alliance threatening to put Damascus in a pincer which he disarmed by mending fences with Turkey and Jordan. Egypt and Saudi Arabia were viewed as key partners but their instinct to appease Washington obstructed close co-operation. In the run up to the invasion of Iraq, Syrian urgings of a united stand against US war plans were an embarrassment to almost all the Arab regimes. As the invasion began, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in Damascus shouted hostile slogans against the rulers of Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Qatar. A Syrian newspaper accused Qatar of

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[55] *Financial Times*, October 29, 2003, p. 14.

[56] *International Herald Tribune*, October 8, 14, 15, 2003.

[57] *Interpress Service*, October 8, 2003.

[58] www.counterpunch.com, October 7, 2003.

[59] *al-Hayat*, October 27, 2001; *Financial Times*, October 9, 2003, p. 13.

having become an "American base for the subjugation of the Gulf and the control of [Arab oil] treasures" while the editor of the Kuwaiti newspaper compared the rule of Bashshar al-Asad to that of Saddam Hussein.[60]

When Damascus came under intense US threats after the overthrow of the Saddam regime, Egypt's Mubarak's only belatedly gave Syria support with a visit to Damascus; Egypt's official line was to advise Syria not to provoke the US.[61] Ties with Saudi Arabia, which also felt threatened by Washington, were better, but the Saudis were in no position to use their now frayed US relations to mediate on behalf of Syria. There was little sign that what had once been a close alliance between Syria and Iran figured much in the defensive strategies of either state.

On the other hand, Syria drew unexpectedly close to Turkey, as the accumulating trade and diplomatic ties begun earlier were reinforced by a certain shared interest with Turkey's new Islamist government in containing US ambitions in Iraq and the encouragement they gave to Kurdish "separatism". Turkey's Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul deflected the rhetoric of a visiting Israel official with the observation that "Iran and Syria are our neighbours and we want to improve relations with them. It is necessary to dispel the speculation that they are next" (on the US target list).[62] Gul visited Syria despite US displeasure, Turkey praised Syria for extraditing suspects in terrorist bombings in Istanbul and President al-Asad made a state visit to Turkey in January 2004.

Bashshar's opening to Europe

A major innovation in Syria's policy under Bashshar was the strategic priority given to relations with Europe. Significantly, Bashshar's first state visits outside the Arab world were not to Moscow, the old ally, but to Western Europe − France, Spain, Germany and Britain. Bashshar viewed alignment with Europe as crucial to Syria's economic re-generation and as providing a political shield against US hostility.

Nevertheless the deepening of relations was obstructed by several factors. After the September 11 events, the EU representative disagreed with Syria's insistence that national liberation against occupation must not be conflated with terrorism and rejected Syria's support for the radical Palestinian factions. Relations with the EU were also strained by human rights concerns. Ultimately, the depth of Syrian-European alignment depended on the institutionalisation of their economic relations through an agreement under the Euro-Med Partnership. Negotiations over an agreement had been protracted by Syria's attempt to use them to force European pressure on Israel, by the threat to Syria's industries of unrestricted free trade, and perhaps by the threat to the monopolies of regime-connected crony-capitalists posed by liberal trade rules. But Syria had an increasing economic incentive to participate in the partnership since, after the collapse of the East Bloc, its trade had shifted significantly westward, making the EU its main trading partner. The liberal wing of the regime − Bashshar and his economy ministers − may have seen an agreement as providing leverage to undermine resistance to economic liberalization in the Ba'th party and to move rent-seekers toward the market economy. By the autumn of 2002, Damascus had given up on negotiating exemptions from the standard agreement which will have the effect of forcing open its market.

Opposition to the agreement from inside the regime was undermined by Syria's manifest need for European protection from the threats that surround it. The EU's preference for economic integration and constructive engagement over Washington's use of military force and unilateral sanctions was a lifeline to Damascus.[63] While some European states sided with

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[60] Zisser, "Syria and the war in Iraq", op.cit.
[61] *Cairo Times*, April 24-30, 2003.
[62] *MEI*, April 18, 2003; *MEI*, May 16, 2003.
[63] *al-Ahram Weekly* Online, May 30-June 5, 2002.

the US invasion of Iraq, they did not follow Washington in its hostility toward Syria; for example, even pro-US Madrid condemned the Israel air strike on Syria and exchanged state visits with Damascus.

The EU and Syria initialled Syria's adhesion to the Euro-Med agreement at the end of 2003, a measure that, if ratified, would decisively strengthen the hand of reformers in the regime and begin the gradual incorporation of Syria into the world capitalist economic order. Yet, certain European governments seemed intent on obstructing the agreement by making it conditional on Syria's adherence to the Chemical Weapons Convention. This may give Syrian opponents their chance to de-rail the agreement, but in the unlikely event that Syria were to agree to such a potentially unilateral disarmament, it would, in upsetting the balance of power with Israel, be enormously destabilizing, hence self-defeating for Europe.[64] For Syria it was a worrying sign that the Europeans might well bandwagon with rather than balance against America's hegemonic project in the Middle East.

7. The external threat and domestic politics

Elite conflict and reform

At the time of the invasion of Iraq, President Bashshar al-Asad presided over a diverse coalition with varied interests. There was the "old guard" who had served his father, a "new guard" that came to power with him but from within the system and the outsider technocrats he had coopted into government. The latter were themselves heterogeneous, ranging from neo-liberals (such as trade minister Ghassan al-Rifai) to social democrats (e.g. former industry Minster Issam al-Zaim).

Bashshar used the fall of Baghdad, the deadlocking of reform, and charges of widespread corruption to justify ouster of the government of Prime Minister Mustafa Miro in September 2003. He proposed a new government dominated by independent technocrats, reserving only the key security portfolios for Ba'thists. However, Bashshar could not rally sufficient support within the party Regional Command which must approve governments; citing the regional crisis, the RC declared it inopportune to curtail the party's role at a time of intense external threat. In the new government, the portfolios held by the Ba'th party actually increased, reformist Muhammed al-Atrash lost the finance ministry, Ghassan al-Rifai's Economy Ministry was restructured and confined to the management of trade while "new guard" Muhammed Hussein took over a new super finance ministry in charge of banking and overall economic policy. Issam al-Zaim was pushed out of the Ministry of Industry while Miro was shunted aside to the party Worker's Bureau where he would have a major say in appointments to management of public sector industry.

The fall of Zaim and Atrash, key reformers who had made enemies among entrenched interests, seemed to show that the president would or could not support his own hand-picked men. This cost him considerable prestige and, to the many ambitious officials, especially among the new generation, who were wavering between the centres of power, confirmed the old guard's message that it was the party, not the president, they needed to please if they wished to get on. Particularly damaging to the reformist cause was the fall of Issam al-Zaim, who had tried to promote productive enterprise in both the public and private sectors against the parasitic crony-capitalists that made their money on rent from government-sanctioned monopolies, middleman operations, and the exploitation of the public sector for private profit. It was an open secret that Zaim had been locked in a power struggle with Miro; they had tangled, in particular, over Zaim's dissolving of the *Aleppo Chamber of Industry* after the parasitic bourgeoisie had marginalized productive industrialists from the organization. When

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[64] ICG, "Syria under Bashar" (I), p. 21.

Zaim released the assets of a German firm which was being blackmailed to pay a commission to a corrupt manager, he was himself falsely accused of receiving a bribe from the company. The message to foreign investors and contractors could only have been that business in Syria cannot be done without paying off corrupt interests too entrenched to be curbed by reforming ministers.

Stalled political reform

Some opposition activists believed the rapid collapse of the Iraqi regime could be used to initiate change in Syria. Prepared to exploit the regime's discomfiture, but not to be associated with a deeply unpopular US invasion, they argued that a closed regime could not defend the country and a democratic opening was needed to mobilize national solidarity against the US threat. "To stand up to the Americans you have to make internal changes and mobilise people around you", said an analyst close to the government. "If not, you have to follow the Americans. The regime here has not decided which way to go."[65] Certainly, the regime is in a dilemma: having weakened civil society, it lacks the capacity to mobilize the strong domestic support needed to stand up to the external threat, but the alternative of appeasing the US would only further weaken its domestic legitimacy. Nobody in the elite believes domestic change can be avoided but a serious debate is raging inside the party over the extent and direction it should take.

A sufficient national consensus does exist to minimize the risks of a political opening. While the so-called Syria Reform Party trumpeted itself as Washington's chosen instrument of regime change, an exiled opposition figure famously said that not a single Syrian would accept to return to Syria on a US tank. Regime security baron, Bahjat Suleiman acknowledged that the Syrian opposition was loyal and Bashshar claimed that the small percentage of people who thought the war on Iraq would help democracy had been disillusioned by the disaster it inflicted on that country.[66]

Nor would such an opening change Syria's foreign policy position. No opposition figure advocates reducing support for Hizbollah or for militant Palestinians; rather, the regime is criticized for its concessions to the US, such as its vote for UN 1441 and for the ineffectualness of its response to the Israeli attacks. Reformers "see no evidence of the Americans wanting democracy in Syria, rather they want to change the behaviour of the regime in favour of the Israelis."[67] Moreover, Syrians of all ages, sects and classes seem to share a profound dislike of Bush, who they see as the true terrorist for having attacked Iraq on behalf of Israel and to seize its oil. Some favourably compare their president to the failure of the "cowards who run the Arab countries" to stand up to Bush.[68] The Iraq war has stimulated an Islamic revival and some speculate that the regime is trying to take advantage of their common opposition to the US to strike a tacit détente with Islamic forces that have long represented the main alternative to Ba'thist rule.[69]

Yet, the regime lacks the confidence to take advantage of this juncture, perhaps believing that an opening would be taken as a sign of weakness that would stimulate demands for greater concessions. An overly-sensitive regime closed down Ali Firzat's independent satirical newspaper for implying that Saddam had fallen because Iraqis would not fight for a regime in which they had no stake.[70] As Haitham al-Maleh, a human rights campaigner and opposition figurehead Riyad al-Turk pointed out, US pressures undermined reformers and

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[65] *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003.

[66] *al-Safir*, May 15, 2003; nytimes.com/2003/12/01.

[67] *Financial Times*, October 29, 2003. p. 14.

[68] Saul Landau, "A report from Syria: Between Israel and Iraq ... a hard place", www.counterpunch.com, July 26, 2003.

[69] www.csmonitor.com, November 3, 2003.

[70] *International Herald Tribune*, July 24, 2003, p. 2.

enabled the regime to justify continued emergency powers.[71] The regime was unprepared to experiment with internal reform at a time of exceptional external threat.

8. Conclusion

Although the Western media frequently paint Syria as a "rogue" state, it is the US "hyperpower" that represents the threat to Middle East stability as it blunderingly upsets power balances and inflames a "clash of civilizations". Syria, by contrast, is merely defending its core national interests, as any state would do, against Washington's violent invasion of a friendly neighbouring state and its efforts to deprive Syria of its regional stature and of its cards in the contest with Israel.

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[71] *Financial Times*, August 26, 2003.