

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

from [*The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*](#)

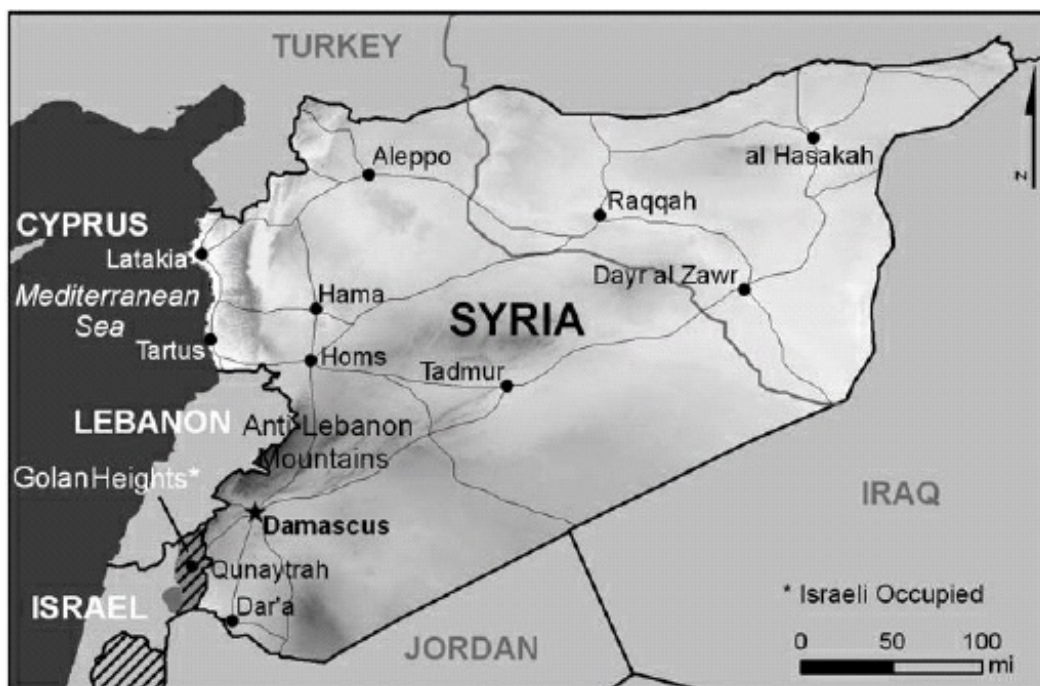
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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Syria could genuinely be called a crossroads of history because of the numerous civilizations and religions that have established themselves in this ancient territory. Damascus, the capital of the Syrian Arab Republic, is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. But the modern identification of Syria as an Arab and Muslim territory began with the seventh-century Muslim conquest. Under the Umayyad caliphate founded in Damascus in 661, Syria was the center of a vast Arab empire. Subsequently it became a province of successive Muslim empires ruled from Baghdad or Cairo and finally, under the Ottomans, from Istanbul.

Syria became extremely important to the Ottoman sultan as one of the Arab territories that remained under real Ottoman control until World War I. As Ottoman power began to decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a new class emerged in Syria of urban notables who functioned as local authorities and intermediaries with Ottoman officials. These notables became important political players in Syria for the remainder of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. The Arab Muslim majority in Syria, already resentful of the privileges the minority Christians in the area received from sympathetic European powers, avidly supported the pan-Islamism espoused by Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Hamid II. In return, the Sublime Porte assisted in the development of Syria's agricultural and commercial sectors. This mutual give-and-take reinforced the long-standing links between the empire and Syrian cities such as Damascus and Aleppo.

As the Ottoman Empire became subject to more pressure from the Europeans, Ottoman-led “defensive modernization”—and responses to it—were felt in Syria. Syria became a focus of a proto-Arab nationalist response to European encroachment and modernization, engendered by the so-called Arab awakening, an Arabic literary movement centered in the Levant in the second half of the 1800s, and strengthened in reaction to “Turkification” policies after the Young Turk revolution of 1908, which generated in Syria a desire for more representative government and Arab autonomy within the empire.



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When World War I erupted in 1914, Istanbul feared that Arab nationalism could be used as an ideological wedge to break Syria free from the Ottoman Empire, and it dealt harshly with the Arab nationalists. Indeed, an Arab revolt, which some Syrians supported, while more remained loyal to Istanbul, was led from the Hijaz by Sharif Hussein and his son Faisal. The British had negotiated with Hussein to launch the revolt in return for vague promises (embodied in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence) of Arab independence in a state including much of what is now Syria, but they had made contrary promises to their French allies in the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Damascus was taken by British and Arab forces in October 1918, and Faisal was installed as head of a short-lived Syrian kingdom. However, the British abandoned Faisal, leaving Syria to fend for itself against French troops, which occupied the country in July 1920 after overcoming armed resistance.

The immediate outcome of the British-French occupation of *bilad ash-sham*, or greater Syria, was the creation of four ministates, with present-day Lebanon, Jordan, Iskanderun (Alexandretta)/Hatay, and Palestine/Israel separated from the remaining Syrian rump. Syrians perceived these areas to have been artificially separated from Syria as a result of European manipulation.

The resulting state was indeed an arbitrary construction. The Mediterranean Sea is Syria's only natural border, while the others were for the most part drawn by the European powers. The country's longest borders are those with Turkey to the north (822 kilometers) and Iraq to the east (605 kilometers). The eastern four-fifths of Syria constitute a large, mostly semiarid and desert plain—in essence the northern extension of the Arabian Desert. As such, nearly 80 percent of all Syrians live in the western 20 percent of the country, with the bulk residing in a north-south line of cities (Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus) that generally separates the more fertile western areas of the country from the semiarid and desert plain. The borders that became modern Syria cut off many parts of the country from their traditional mercantile and cultural links in neighboring areas. However, a number of cross-border affinities and ties persisted and are most apparent in the common Syrian mantra regarding Lebanon: “two lands, one people.” These cross-cultural identities have had political implications over the years that have at times complicated Syria's relations with its neighbors.

In addition to dismembering the country, the French further adopted a divide-and-rule policy to prevent any coherent opposition from congealing against them. The remainder of French-mandated Syria was therefore divided into five zones: Latakia was carved out for the Alawites, Alexandretta for the Turks, and Jabal Druze for the Druze; the Sunni Muslims were divided between Aleppo and Damascus.

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Capital city	Damascus
Chief of state, 2012	President Bashar al-Asad
Head of government, 2012	Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi
Legal political parties, 2012	National Progressive Front (includes Arab Socialist Renaissance [Ba'th] Party), Socialist Unionist Democratic Party, Syrian Arab Socialist Union, Syrian Communist Party, Syrian Social Nationalist Party, Unionist Socialist Party
Ethnic groups	Arab (90.3%), Kurds, Armenians, and other (9.7%)
Religious groups	Sunni Muslim (74%), other Muslim, mainly Alawite and Druze (16%), Christian (10%)
Export partners, 2011	Iraq (38.8%), Italy (7.9%), Germany (7.1%), Saudi Arabia (6.5%), Kuwait (4.2%)
Import partners, 2011	Saudi Arabia (14.5%), China (10.1%), United Arab Emirates (7.1%), Turkey (6.7%), Iran (5.3%), Italy (5%), Russia (4.5%), Iraq (4.3%)

French rule was generally regarded by Syrians as oppressive. French was introduced in the schools at the expense of Arabic, and the unstable French franc became legal tender. Embittered Syrian nationalists played upon these obvious symbols of the French presence and won widespread support in their opposition to French rule. Traditional ethnic and religious leaders also opposed French rule, leading to a series of minor rebellions. The most serious rebellion began in the summer of 1925, when rebel Druze tribesmen drove the French out of the towns and villages in Jabal Druze. French military superiority, however, most notably on display with the bombardment of Damascus, had squashed the revolt by the end of the year.

Although Franco-Syrian relations remained tense, differences subsequently played out for the most part in the political arena. In 1936 a Franco-Syrian treaty conceded an elected parliament and some self-government under a French governor. However, cession of the province of Iskanderun to Turkey in 1939 to keep the latter neutral in World War II incensed the Syrians. The weakening of the Western

imperial powers in World War II provided the Syrians with the opportunity to gain full independence. When the Free French ousted the pro-German Vichy governor in the summer of 1941, they promised full independence in order to win Syrian support. Although an elected nationalist government came to power in 1943 under President Shukri al-Quwatli, full independence was not achieved until 1946, when the last French soldiers reluctantly withdrew under British pressure after having again bombarded Damascus.

Despite the antagonistic relationship between the French and most indigenous Syrians, the mandate period significantly influenced the educational system (particularly the private schools), the judicial system, and many important sectors of the economy. Even French language, fashion, cuisine, and architecture are still easily recognizable in Syria. A French practice having enduring political consequences was the recruitment of Alawites into the local military force in numbers far exceeding their percentage of the population. For the traditionally persecuted Alawite sect, joining the military, looked upon with derision by most other Syrians for its tacit cooperation with the French, was one of the few available avenues for upward social mobility. After independence, as the military became politicized and a vehicle for acquiring power, the Alawites were in an advantageous position to advance within the political system. Another enduring outcome of the mandate was the deepening of economic dependence upon Europe, as the French tried to make the country a market for its industries and a site for its investors while orienting Syrian agricultural exports to Europe.

After independence, political power was assumed by a group of politicians from great urban landed or merchant families who had held local power under the Ottomans and gained some nationalist legitimacy from their long struggle against French suzerainty. However, this older generation of Syrian leaders came to be seen by the younger generation as corrupt and failing to deliver on their promise of real independence. The new generation rejected not only the old elites but also their Western liberal ideologies.

The seminal event precipitating the delegitimation of the first-generation elite was the first Arab-Israeli war, from 1947 to 1949. The Syrian government at the time, led by Shukri al-Quwatli, was utterly discredited by its corrupt and inept mishandling of a war that resulted in a humiliating defeat for the Arab combatants, most of whom, including Syria, were more concerned about the strategic designs of rival Arab states than about coordinating military strategy against Israel. The discontent among the populace and in the military following the war created an opening for the entrance of the army into Syrian politics, beginning with the seizure of power in March 1949 by a military junta led by General Husni al-Zaim.

Syria's political instability was even more evident in the two successive coups of 1949, ending with Colonel Adib al-Shishakli taking power in December. Al-Shishakli ruled first from behind the scenes, then later as president, until he was ousted in another military coup in 1954. Internal instability also reflected the penetration of the country—via propaganda, money, and guns—by rival Arab and global powers during the Cold War, making Syria a battleground between pro-Western Iraq, which sought to bring the Arabs into the anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact, and Arab nationalist Egypt, which advocated Cold War neutrality.

The 1947 parliamentary elections demonstrated the growing cleavages in the Syrian polity as well as the increasing public disenchantment with mandate-era politicians. They also marked the appearance of what would become the most important political force in Syria, the Ba'th Party, an ardently nationalistic group with a pan-Arab, socialist doctrine. The Ba'th Party arose from the ideological meeting of the minds of three Syrians—Michel Aflaq, a Christian Arab; Salah al-Din Bitar, a Sunni Arab; and Zaki al-Arzuzi,

an Alawite—who agreed on the need for Arab unity, independence from imperialism, and “Arab socialism.” The Ba'th Party might have remained an ideological party of the periphery were it not for its association with the parliamentary deputy from Hama, Akram al-Hawrani. He ultimately provided the muscle for the Ba'th with his close ties with various elements of the Syrian military, which would soon become the final political arbiter in the country. The relationship was symbiotic, for al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party needed the ideological foundation the Ba'th provided. The formal merger occurred in late 1952, making the Ba'th Party a serious contender for power. It was able to force upon whatever government was in power the increasingly popular demands of anti-Zionism and neutralist Arab nationalism. The other important actor on the radical Left was the Communist Party, which benefited from Soviet support for Syria against Western pressures to align with the Baghdad Pact. The Communists also opposed so-called capitalist reactionaries and imperialists. Although the Ba'thists were suspicious of the Communists because their ideology was alien and their actions were dictated by an outside power, the two groups often cooperated against the conservative oligarchy and its Western backers.

The Ba'th Party steadily increased its share of seats in parliament and disproportionately influenced Syria's foreign policy orientation, which veered toward the Soviet Union and pan-Arab nationalism. This culminated in Syria's ill-fated union with Egypt in February 1958, in the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR). The UAR failed because the two countries simply did not fit, economically or politically. Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Egyptian cohorts came to dominate the “province” of Syria in a manner distasteful to a number of Syrian parties, not least of which was the Ba'th, which had originally pushed for the merger yet soon became marginalized by pro-Nasserist elements. Finally, in September 1961, following yet another coup by parties representing the traditional elite in Damascus, Syria seceded from the UAR. However, the restored parliamentary regime was not really representative of the direction of Syrian politics, leaving a vacuum that would be filled by the Ba'th Party. The nationalist Left was now fragmented between those who demanded unconditional reunion with Egypt (Nasserites) and the Ba'th, now wary of Nasser.

The Ba'th Party formally came to power in Syria in March 1963 via a military coup by Ba'thist officers, who from that time dominated the party and regime. Originating in a conspiracy by a handful of military officers, the Ba'th regime started as an “army-party symbiosis,” built on a narrow base and facing opposition across the whole spectrum of political society, from Nasserites to Islamists to liberals. Internally, the regime was wracked by power struggles over ideology and personal ambition between the first-generation leaders, Aflaq and Bitar and their military partisans, and a younger generation of radical leftists championed by General Salah Jadid. Since sectarianism played a prominent role in the construction of rival coalitions in this and subsequent power struggles, officers from the minority Alawi sect emerged as a dominant clique, owing to their disproportionate recruitment into the army and party and also to class and regional divisions among the Sunnis.

In 1966 an intra-Ba'th coup brought Jadid's radical wing of the party to power. The regime started breaking out of its isolation thorough a “revolution from above” that broke the economic hold of the oligarchy, won the support of peasants with land reform, and created through nationalizations a public sector employing major segments of the middle and working classes. Embracing the Soviet Union and espousing a more assertive anti-Israel policy, the Jadid regime sought nationalist legitimacy by championing Palestinian fedayeen operating against Israel and seeking to push Nasser into a more assertive policy toward Israel. This reckless policy culminated in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, in which Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank (including Arab East Jerusalem)

from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Jadid later oversaw Syria's intervention in the September 1970 Jordanian civil war, also known as Black September. This led to his removal by moderate elements in the Ba'th leadership led by Hafiz al-Asad, an Alawite military officer who at the time was minister of defense and commander of the air force. Asad was formally elected president by public referendum in March 1971.

Hafiz al-Asad's coup ushered in the consolidation of the Ba'th regime. Under the radical Ba'thists who preceded him (1963–1970), the regime had already broken the control of the dominant classes over the economy and mobilized workers and peasants via its social reforms, notably land reform. Asad now constructed a “presidential monarchy” that concentrated power in his own hands. He used his control of the army to free himself of dependence on the Ba'th Party's ideologues and placed a core of largely Alawite personal followers in the security apparatus to give him autonomy from the army. Secure in control of the party and army, he co-opted the private bourgeoisie through limited economic liberalization; elements of the Damascene Sunni bourgeoisie entered into tacit business alliances with Alawite military elites. Penetrating society, the party organization and its auxiliaries incorporated a popular following from both Sunni and non-Sunni villages. Thus, Asad built a cross-sectarian coalition whose effectiveness proved itself in defeating the major Islamic fundamentalist uprising of 1978 to 1982. To build his regime, Asad also depended on external resources—that is, Soviet arms, with which he built up the army, and Arab oil money, with which he expanded the bureaucracy and co-opted the bourgeoisie. Asad tried to legitimize his regime as a bulwark of the Arab cause against Israel, and his relative success in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War provided a legitimacy bonus that allowed him to entrench his leadership.

Major subsequent watersheds in Hafiz al-Asad's presidency included the 1970s economic expansion, spurred by economic liberalization and an influx of Arab oil money; Syria's post-1974 involvement in Arab-Israel diplomacy, brokered by the United States; and the 1976 Syrian intervention in Lebanon. The 1980s were a period of major stress on the regime, with a serious insurgency led by the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) from 1978 to 1982; an intensified threat from Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, after which Syria became bogged down in a struggle with Israel and its Maronite allies over control of Lebanon; a 1984 bid for power by Hafiz's brother Rifat, when the former fell ill; economic decline, as Arab aid fell after 1986; and Western isolation of Syria for its alleged support of terrorism. These stresses were accompanied by decreasing tolerance for dissent, a decline in ideological life in the Ba'th Party, and the growing power of the *mukhabarat* intelligence services and various praetorian guard units that defended the presidency. In the 1990s, Syria lost its Soviet superpower patron but veered, in compensation, toward the United States, joining the anti-Iraq coalition in the 1990–1991 Gulf War and the subsequent Madrid peace process with Israel under US auspices. The resulting windfall of Gulf Arab aid and brief emergence from international isolation, combined with new early-1990s economic-liberalization measures, sparked a brief economic boom that had petered out by the death of Hafiz al-Asad in June 2000.

The succession of Bashar al-Asad to the presidency in 2000 marked the transformation of Syria into a *jumrukiyya*, or family republic. Bashar's project was to “modernize authoritarianism”—to adapt it to the age of globalization by initiating a move toward a market economy, accompanied by limited relaxation of political controls over society and a foreign policy reorientation to the West. This project, however, became hostage to Syria's new conflicts with the West over Iraq and Lebanon. It also had major social costs, generating crony capitalism, a reneging on the populist social contract, and growing societal inequalities that prepared the way for the uprising that began in March 2011.

Demography and Society

The population of Syria numbers a little over 22 million, 35 percent of which is below the age of fourteen. The capital and largest city in Syria, Damascus, has a population of approximately 2.52 million, Aleppo has 2.98 million, Homs has 1.27 million, and Hama has 854,000. Approximately 90.3 percent of the population is Arab, including some 400,000 Palestinian refugees. As such, Arabic is the official and most widely spoken language. Kurds make up 5 to 9 percent of the population, depending upon the source. Many Kurds still speak Kurdish, and most live in the northeastern portion of the country, although sizable numbers reside in the major cities. Armenians, clustered primarily in and around Aleppo, and a smattering of other ethnicities, such as Turkmen, Circassians, and Jews, make up the remaining small percentage of the population.

Sunni Muslims account for 74 percent of the population, with Alawites at 12 percent, Christians (of various sects, although the largest is Greek Orthodox) at 10 percent, Druze at 3 percent (mostly located in southwestern Syria in the Jabal Druze region), and Jews and some small Muslim sects (e.g., Ismailis, Twelver Shi'a) at 1 percent. The Alawites, originating in the Latakia mountains, are an obscure offshoot of Shi'a Islam; they venerate Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin of Muhammad, and integrate some Christian and Zoroastrian rituals and holidays into their faith. Considered heretical by Sunni Muslims and even most Shi'a Muslims, followers of Alawite Islam were a persecuted minority in the area for centuries before becoming part of the new ruling elite under the Ba'th.

Political Economy

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, Syria had a largely self-sufficient agrarian and trade-based economy. Its agrarian economy was, however, also somewhat precarious: of Syria's 71,504 square miles (185,170 square kilometers), arable land amounts to only about one-quarter of the total. Rainfall is seasonal, most of it coming in the winter months and falling in the northern and westernmost parts of the country, while the semiarid steppe and desert regions receive less than two hundred centimeters (eight inches) of rain per year. Although 80 percent of Syria's agriculture is rain-fed, the government in recent years has invested heavily in developing irrigation systems to maintain crop production during drought years. Cotton is Syria's largest cash crop, accounting for approximately 50 percent of agricultural gross domestic product (GDP). The agricultural sector also produces large quantities of wheat, barley, sugar beets, and olives.

During the late Ottoman and French periods, Syria developed a largely agricultural export economy dependent on imports of manufactured goods. After World War II, a burst of growth in mechanized agriculture and light industry took place, but it appeared to have exhausted itself by the late 1950s. A strong feeling therefore developed among Syrians that state intervention was necessary to overcome economic dependency, push ahead industrialization, and effect a more equitable distribution of national wealth, which was monopolized by the landed oligarchy. In consequence, the 1963–1966 period under the Ba'th was characterized by large-scale nationalizations of banks and big industries and a land reform that limited the size of the great estates and redistributed the surplus to landless peasants.

The path of state capitalism in Syria, however, resulted in a bloated and inefficient public sector that for over four decades provided the support base for the ruling regime. Regime survival drove economic policy, and the public sector was used as a source of patronage to feed a pervasive clientelist network, primarily in the military, bureaucracy, and other elements of society tied to the state apparatus. Hafiz al-Asad also used arbitrariness as a method of control; the 1986 foreign-currency law, ostensibly intended

to crack down on black market foreign-currency exchanges, is a case in point. When the economy faced endemic crisis beginning in the 1980s, Asad embarked on a program of “selective liberalization.” It had to be “selective” because if either Asad (father or son) were to liberalize too much or too quickly, the public-sector patronage system keeping the regime in power could be undermined. Nevertheless, state employees were adversely affected by economic liberalization, with a decrease in real wages due to currency devaluation, a reduction of subsidies, and under Bashar al-Asad some covert privatization that threatened job security.

In addition to the continuing burden of an overly dominant public sector, a number of other problems inhibited economic growth in the remaining private sector: the absence of a tradition of large-scale domestic capital investment, leading to a proliferation of small-scale enterprise with often outdated technology and investment in nonproductive areas; the lack until recently of a private banking system and stock market to organize capital; an inadequate regulatory regime; insufficient transparency; a corrupt and politicized judiciary; and the ubiquitous necessity of *wasta* (intermediaries). Protected by high tariffs, most domestic industries did not have to become competitive enough to export.

Syria's selective liberalization in the 1990s had some success, buoyed by grants and investment from Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Domestically, Investment Law No. 10 of May 1991 offered investors duty-free privileges for the import of capital goods and other materials. However, this measure was not followed up with other necessary reforms, and the business environment in Syria became typically captive to the deteriorating situation in the Arab-Israeli arena.

The economic challenges facing the country when Bashar al-Asad came to power were manifold. Syria had not managed to advance beyond the group of lower-middle-income countries, with purchasing power parity income per capita of only \$5,100 in 2011. Syria needed to rapidly expand its labor market to absorb a projected annual labor force increase of 4 percent, due primarily to high population growth. Syria's GDP was highly dependent on the agrarian and oil sectors. It produces approximately 300,000 barrels of oil per day, but since 2000 this has declined, and Syria is forecast, barring significant discovery of new oil reserves, to become a net oil importer soon.

Syrians agree on the need for deep, systemic economic reform, though there is no consensus about the pace of change and what changes should be implemented. At the Ba'th Party regional congress in June 2005, President Bashar al-Asad proposed the adoption of a “social market economy” in which a market economy would be combined with social safety nets to help those who might fall through the cracks during and after the transition process. In this transition, Syrian officials wanted to emulate the Chinese model, in which a strong central government regulates the economy, the public sector is reformed to be competitive in global markets, and a parallel private sector expands the market economy. Bashar prioritized educational reform because the deficit in skills hampers Syria's ability to integrate itself into the globalized economy. Private banks and a stock market were approved, and tariffs with Turkey and the Arab countries were slashed. Much more structural reform was needed, but this was retarded by bureaucratic inertia, external conflicts, and the isolation from the West that Syria faced after opposing the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The culture of caution that exists in Syria ensured that change would occur only at an incremental pace. The risk, which was eventually realized, was that economic deterioration would engender political instability.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Hafiz al-Asad consolidated an authoritarian regime that concentrated personal power in a “presidential monarchy.” The presidency became the main source of public policy and enjoyed powers of command,

appointment, and patronage over the ruling party, army, intelligence agencies, and government bureaucracy. The president is elected to a seven-year renewable term after nomination by the Ba'th Party's Regional Command (al-Qiyadah al-Qutriyah) and the parliament. Hafiz al-Asad was confirmed by unopposed referenda five times, and his son Bashar has been confirmed twice, in 2000 and 2007. Second only to the presidency in policy making is the Regional Command, the top collegial leadership body, roughly divided between senior military commanders, senior cabinet ministers, and top party officials. It endorses policy initiatives and commands the party apparatus, which has systematically penetrated all other institutions of state and civil society. Intraelite politics plays out largely in the relationship between the presidency, the party, and the heads of the multiple security agencies.

A major test of the regime's institutions was the succession upon the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in 2000. However, the party and army elite closed ranks and, to prevent a power struggle, confirmed Bashar al-Asad as the new president. Initially Bashar had to share power with the “old guard”—his father's lieutenants, powerful security barons, and party bosses—who expected him to govern as first among equals. Not having risen from within the regime, Bashar initially lacked a power base. But the presidency gave him unmatched powers of appointment, which he used to replace the older generation with younger officials beholden to himself. His presidency became the source of a spate of economic reform proposals, often delayed by the Regional Command but eventually approved by parliament. Finally, at the 2005 Ba'th Party congress, Bashar engineered the replacement of his rivals in the party hierarchy. This narrowed the inner circle of the regime by excluding such Sunni party bosses as former vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam and some intelligence barons and their private-sector partners. In 2007, Bashar was inaugurated for a second seven-year term, his personal power consolidated.

Second only to the president in coercive power are the heads of the multiple intelligence or security services (*mukhabarat*), whose function is surveillance of possible threats from external enemies, the domestic opposition, the army, and each other. While they are instruments through which the president controls the other power centers, they have significant powers of their own in that they vet all candidates for office and promotion. They also have extralegal power, allowing them to become powerful political brokers whose support ambitious politicians and prominent businessmen seek. They control or co-opt large parts of society via networks of informers and the dispensing of semilicit privileges.

The regime rests on three overlapping pillars of power: the party apparatus, the army, and the government bureaucracy, headed by the Council of Ministers. Although subordinated to the presidency, the Ba'th Party apparatus remains a key pillar of the regime. It has over 11,000 cells (*halaqat*) located in villages, factories, neighborhoods, and public institutions and grouped into 154 subbranches at the district (*mantiqah*) or town level, which are combined into eighteen branches (*furu'*) in the provinces (*muhafazat*), big cities, and major institutions such as universities. A parallel structure exists inside the army and security services. At the national level, a party congress of some 1,200 delegates resolves intraelite conflicts and approves major new policies. A ninety-member Central Committee includes the senior regime elite of party functionaries, ministers, generals, security chiefs, governors, heads of syndicates, and university presidents. The Central Committee elects a fifteen-member Regional Command, whose members either preside over internal party organization and finance or oversee bureaus supervising the military and security agencies, peasants and agriculture, economic affairs, education, unions, and youth. In 2000, party membership numbered nearly 2 million, including teachers, students, state employees, peasants, and workers—an overwhelmingly middle- and lower-class constituency. The party also controls syndical organizations such as worker, peasant, and professional

unions and chambers of commerce and industry. These institutions give the regime roots in society and bridge sectarian and urban-rural gaps. Their debilitation in the 2000s, when the president perceived the party as an obstacle to his economic reforms, helps account for the antiregime mobilization of 2011.

The military is another main pillar of the regime. When Ba'th officers brought the party to power in 1963, they inevitably became an equal or senior partner in the new military-party state. But Hafiz al-Asad effectively subordinated the military to his authority. He established firm control over appointments and dismissals of senior officers and created presidential guard units and special forces charged with regime defense and recruited on the basis of political loyalty and (Alawite) sectarian affiliation. Alawite Ba'th officers hold a disproportionate number of top operational commands, especially of potentially coup-making armored units. The larger army, charged with external defense, is more depoliticized and professionally disciplined. The professional officer corps is represented in the president's inner circle by the minister of defense and chief of staff. The continued loyalty of the military explains the ability of the regime to survive in the face of the mass uprising that began in 2011.

The function of the government bureaucracy, headed by the prime minister and the cabinet (Council of Ministers), is to implement the policy of the president and the party, which together appoint cabinet ministers. However, the bureaucracy is so inefficient and colonized by vested interests that it has become more an obstacle than an instrument of the president's economic reforms.

There is no effective separation of powers. The parliament (People's Assembly) merely responds to government initiatives and normally approves government legislation. Deputies mainly act as brokers between officials and their constituents—notably those seeking favors. Although formally elected by popular vote, the regime has manipulated the composition of parliament: two-thirds of the seats are reserved for candidates of the National Progressive Front, an alliance of the Ba'th Party and several small leftist and nationalist parties. In order to co-opt elements outside its power base, the regime has allowed independent candidates, mostly from the urban bourgeoisie, to contest the remaining seats. The judiciary is politicized through party control of appointments. The legal process suffers from corruption and interminable delays in litigation and fails to guarantee the rule of law, civil liberties, and property rights. Hence, redress of grievances typically rests on access to informal clientelistic connections. Judicial reform and independence are widely recognized as essential to Bashar al-Asad's reform project. One of the regime's prime weapons against internal dissent is Decree 51 of 1963, which declared a state of emergency. Lifting of the emergency law and abolition of the associated extra-constitutional Supreme State Security Courts are two of the prime objectives of Syrian human rights and democracy activists, but the regime has always claimed they are justified by Syria's "living in a dangerous neighborhood."

POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Politics in Ba'thist Syria has taken varying forms. In the 1963–1970 period, it turned on ideological conflicts between Left and Right within the party, settled at party congresses or by intraparty military coups. Once Hafiz al-Asad consolidated the regime, politics as usual took the form of conflicts over the evolution of economic policy among politicians, technocrats, and business representatives and a search for collective group redress through the party and corporatist institutions or for individual privileges through personal connections, notably in the security forces and party apparatus. Contestation over the larger direction of the country occurred during periods of crisis, such as the failed 1978–1982 Islamic revolution and after the 2000 presidential succession, when the new president was struggling to establish his authority, and the degree of liberalization was being contested between the president and the party. In both periods, nonregime actors—Islamists and liberals—sought to reshape Syrian politics

with limited success. The uprising of 2011 ushered in a violent contest to shape Syria's future.

The Ba'th Regime and Political Islam

Political Islam provided the strongest and most durable opposition to the Ba'th regime. While the regime was initially rooted in the rural areas, the Islamic opposition was concentrated in traditional urban quarters, led by politicized ulema (religious scholars) and the Muslim Brotherhood, whose members were typically recruited from urban merchant families. In the 1960s, they denounced the secularism of the regime and protested the state takeover of foreign trade and restrictions on imports, which deprived merchants of business. From 1977 to 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood instigated a violent insurrection against the regime; corruption, sectarian favoritism, Hafiz al-Asad's 1976 confrontation with the Palestinians in Lebanon, and Sunni resentment of minority domination generated fertile conditions for it. The Brotherhood attacked the Alawites as unbelievers and, reflecting the worldview of the *suq* (bazaar), called for an Islamic economy based on free enterprise. The revolt was concentrated in the northern cities and towns, especially Hama, a historic center of Islamic piety and of the great Sunni landholding families curbed by Ba'thist land reforms. By contrast, the Damascene bourgeoisie, enriched by the disproportionate share of public money expended in the capital, remained quiet during the uprising. The insurrection failed, owing to its fragmented and largely unknown leadership and the urban bias of its social base. The regime, backed by its rural base, remained cohesive, and the security apparatus, led by Alawite troops with a stake in regime survival, mounted a repressive campaign marked by the 1982 sack of Hama, in which an estimated 15,000 to 30,000 people were killed.

With the Brotherhood's supporters jailed and its leaders exiled, a less politicized, less oppositional Islamization of society was tolerated by the regime. Hafiz al-Asad sought to tame political Islam through an alliance with moderate Islam, represented by the Grand Mufti Kaftaro and Muhammad Sa'id al-Buti, who preached a moderate Islam and opposed Islamist violence against the regime. Bashar al-Asad continued this strategy as a counter to both radical Islamists and the secular opposition, resulting in the spread of Islamic schools and charities, conservative attire, and mosque attendance. This largely nonpolitical Islam, concentrating on personal piety, rejecting violence, and mobilizing around nonpolitical issues such as opposition to liberal reform of Syrian family law, seemed unthreatening to the regime. While the majority of the ulema, recruited from the *suq* merchant class and seeing the acquisition of wealth as a sign of God's favor, had rejected Ba'thist socialism, they were appeased by Bashar's increasingly neoliberal tangent, and some benefited from the Gulf money attracted by the Islamic financial institutions allowed by the regime. The offloading of welfare responsibilities onto the private charities the ulema controlled helped co-opt and empower them. Bashar also built alliances with the interlocked business and religious elite of formerly oppositionist Aleppo, which benefited from his economic opening to Turkey.

At the same time, the regime sought to control Islam. It appointed the senior ulema, such as muftis and imams of the big mosques, and benefited from the divisions between the Damascus and Aleppo ulema, the Sufi orders and their Salafi critics, and conservative imams and modernists, further dividing them by repressing some and favoring others. The regime sought to regulate Islamic institutions and assume some control over the distribution of *zakat* (charitable donations) and attempted to reintroduce limits on public displays of piety. The government's coming to terms with political Islam initially enhanced stability. But for what is sometimes called a "regime of minorities," the consequent erosion of secularism carried real dangers, which manifested themselves in the Islamic color of much of the 2011 uprising.

Presidential Succession, Stalled Democratization, and "Authoritarian Upgrading"

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Bashar al-Asad's July 2000 succession was widely welcomed. Politically inexperienced, he was not thought to threaten the incumbent elite. As an Asad, he assured the Alawites that he would not betray his father's heritage. Yet among the public, especially the younger generation, he was popular, seen as uncorrupted and as a modernizer, who, in his inaugural speech, invited constructive criticism of the regime. According to Volker Perthes, however, Bashar's intention was to “modernize authoritarianism.” His project required limited political liberalization and more rule of law, but not democratization. He initially hoped to liberalize politics, at least to the extent this would help legitimize his position and advance economic reform. However, when Bashar encouraged civil society to express constructive criticism as a way to strengthen his reformist agenda in the 2000–2001 Damascus Spring, hard-line opposition figures framed political change in zero-sum terms by attacking the legacy of Hafiz and spotlighting the corruption of regime barons. Regime hard-liners were strengthened, and Bashar shut down the experiment.

In principle, Bashar could have struck an alliance with the loyal opposition to further the kind of limited political liberalization that helped other Arab rulers control the opposition, and he could have strengthened his hand against the old guard by allowing the formation of a bourgeois neoliberal party. Such moves arguably would have increased his regime's co-optative capabilities, but democratization was never in the cards. No democratic coalition emerged pushing for it. Democracy activists among the intelligentsia suffered from fragmentation, resource scarcity, and relative isolation from mass society. The chaos and sectarian conflict in Iraq and the fear—ignited by Kurdish riots in 2004 and the rise of Islamist militancy—that democratization would spread the “Iraqi disease” to Syria led the public to put a high premium on stability. This generated for the regime what might be called “legitimacy because of a worse alternative.” The continuing struggle over Palestine and the Golan also allowed the regime to justify a national security state and provided nationalist legitimacy that seemed to substitute for democratization. The business class, dependent as it was on the state for opportunities (contracts, licenses) and for disciplining the working class and rolling back populism, had no interest in a democratization that could empower the masses to block economic liberalization. Even regime reformers believed their economic reforms would be blocked if the masses were empowered by the vote; indeed, the first stages of Bashar's economic-reform program meant a rollback in the populist social contract and a stage of crony capitalism that was incompatible with the regime winning a free election and could only be sustained by authoritarian power. Not least, the minority Alawite elite feared that sectarian voting (as in Iraq) would allow the Sunni majority to drive it from power. Indeed, their mortal enemy, the Muslim Brotherhood, had the best potential to mobilize mass support.

As a substitute for democratization, Asad embarked on a process of “authoritarian upgrading,” the fostering of alternative constituencies—to substitute for the alliance with workers and peasants that the regime was abandoning—which could be balanced against each other. The regime co-opted reforming technocrats. The new rich and the urban middle class were encouraged to develop their own civil society organizations, such as junior chambers of commerce, or to join several government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations. Critics of the regime were treated more leniently and even encouraged to voice constructive criticism, albeit within boundaries highlighted by episodic instances of selective repression. This was meant to provide a safety valve for discontent, but it also increased consciousness of abuses without opening institutionalized channels of real redress. Similarly, the introduction of the Internet and mobile telephones was seen by Asad, who had been president of the Syrian Computer Society, as an essential tool of economic modernization, which the regime also used to mobilize supporters and legitimize itself. But these moves also gave political activists the ability to build networks, overcome atomization, and publicize abuses. They paved the way for the 2011 uprising.

The Syrian Uprising of March 2011

The seeds of the uprising that began in March 2011 can be seen in the policies by which Bashar al-Asad sought to fix the vulnerabilities of the regime he inherited from his father, notably through economic reform. The root of the regime's problems was that its survival required both nationalist legitimacy and continuing investment. However, the regime's nationalist foreign policy (opposing Israel and the invasion of Iraq), while winning domestic support, brought economic isolation from the West—a main source of capital and technology. This drove the regime's efforts to find alternative sources of revenue via tax cuts and currency and trade liberalization, designed to attract Syrian expatriate capital and surplus liquidity from the Arab Gulf. The drive to evade isolation and increase access to resources sidelined the ideal of a social market economy. The actual policy of Bashar's reforming technocrats was little different from neoliberalism, with its prioritizing of capital accumulation and growth to the neglect of equality and distribution.

The removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs, the decline of farm price supports, and the neglect of the system of agricultural planning and cooperatives, combined with the terrible drought of 2007 to 2009, led to agricultural decline. Poor neighborhoods around the cities burgeoned with an influx of drought victims and Iraqi refugees. In addition, urban real estate speculation unleashed by the influx of Gulf capital, together with an end to rent controls conceded to the landlord class, drove the cost of housing beyond the means of the middle strata. The conspicuous consumption of the new urban rich was at odds with Syrian traditions and alienated those in the surrounding, deprived suburbs. The president was warned that the people perceived the state to be abandoning the poor for the sake of the rich. Free trade agreements ending tariff protection devastated small manufacturers in the suburbs. Parallel to this, authoritarian upgrading fostered alternative constituencies, mostly in the big cities. The regime co-opted big segments of the business class and ulema, traditional centers of opposition to the Ba'th.

In addition, to advance his postpopulist reforms, Asad had concentrated power in the presidency in an extended struggle with the old guard. In uprooting the old guard, he reduced obstacles to his reforms but also weakened powerful interests with clientelistic networks that incorporated key segments of society into the regime. This shrank the scope of elites incorporated into the regime, making the president overly dependent on the presidential family, Alawi security barons, and technocrats lacking bases of support. Also, seeing the party apparatus and the worker and peasant unions as obstacles to economic reform, Asad debilitated them; since they were the regime's organized connection to its rural and Sunni constituency, its social base shrank, becoming more minoritarian and more upper-class. As the party's penetration of neighborhoods and villages declined, citizens who would once have gone to local party or union officials for redress or access increasingly approached tribal, sectarian, or religious notables. In short, seeking to consolidate power within the regime he inherited, Asad unwittingly weakened its capacity to sustain his power over society. Overconcentrating patronage in the hands of the presidential family and thereby narrowing loyalties from party to family core is a dangerous move for authoritarian regimes.

The security forces' overreaction to protests, starting in Dera, in an atmosphere created by the overthrow of authoritarian presidents in Tunisia and Egypt provided the spark for the uprising. While demonstrators at first called for political reform, after a heavy-handed regime response in which over 1,000 demonstrators were killed, they began to call for the president's resignation and an end to the regime. Had Asad reacted with democratic concessions instead of repression, he might have won a free election as a reformer. Given the minority core of the regime, however, making sufficient

democratic concessions to appease the opposition must have appeared too risky, especially since debilitation of the regime's former cross-sectarian base was making it a sectarian-family regime with limited vote-getting capacity.

The uprising continued because there were enough grievances to fuel it among a plurality of the population, while a minority supported the regime as a better alternative than civil war. The uprising was geographically concentrated outside the capital, beginning in the rural peripheries and then spreading to small towns, suburbs, and medium-sized cities. It took on a distinctly Sunni Islamic character. Centers of grievance were mixed areas where Alawis and Sunnis lived together, such as Latakia, Baniyas, and Homs. The regime's supporters included crony capitalists, urban government employees, and minorities, especially Alawis and to a lesser degree Christians, who, not suffering from the restrictions typical in other Muslim countries, were rallied through exploitation of their fear of Salafi Islam. The main cities, Damascus and Aleppo, where the investment boom, surge in tourism, and new consumption were concentrated, remained largely quiescent months into the uprising—although their suburbs were often hotbeds of revolt. The regime was able to mobilize significant counterdemonstrations in these cities, whose middle classes originally saw Bashar as a reformer and, while disillusioned by his repression of the protestors, preferred a peaceful democratization and feared instability and the loss of their secular, modern lifestyle if traditional rural or Salafi insurgents seized power.

The opposition's initial strategy was to mobilize demonstrations on such a broad scale that the army would become exhausted or divided, to exaggerate or provoke violence so as to discredit the regime and prompt foreign intervention, and to damage the economy enough to turn the bourgeoisie against the regime. The regime's repressive response had the effect not of deterring but of spreading the protests, with massive demonstrations filling the streets of medium-sized cities. In August 2011, as many as 1 million demonstrators flooded the streets. However, in a newly intensified crackdown, tanks were used to pacify medium-sized cities such as Hama, Homs, and Deir ez-Zor, and the security forces concentrated on arresting and assassinating activist leaders. By September, these measures seemed to have sharply reduced the numbers involved in street protests to perhaps between 25,000 and 30,000. Also, the regime's determination not to lose control of peripheral areas—which could, as in Libya, become centers of an alternative government backed by outside powers—led to some of the harshest repression in areas such as Tel Kalakh and Jisr ash-Shaghour.

What the opposition had hoped to provoke—a major split in the regime or army—had not happened over a year into the insurgency. However, the uprising had become more violent by early 2012, as the crackdown provoked armed resistance led by deserters from the army. The regime lost control over some areas, leaving a vacuum filled by a combination of civil society and criminality. Rustum, Harasta, Idlib, and Jabal Zawiya emerged as strongholds of opposition. Although opposition fighters were not able to hold such areas against army assaults, neither could the regime keep them pacified when its forces withdrew.

Various external initiatives to halt the violence failed. An Arab League observer force arrived in Syria in December 2011, but extensive violence continued, and the mission ended in failure. In April 2012, the UN Security Council agreed on a peace plan and authorized the dispatch of UN observers to Syria, which, together with a cease-fire, was supposed to lead to political dialogue and a power transition. However, this initiative also failed to stop the violence, with neither side prepared to compromise or negotiate.

In 2012 rebels proved better able to challenge the regime, which responded with greater violence. Levels of insurgent violence increased as the rebels, bolstered by arms and training, improved their

combat capability and coordination and increasingly challenged the regime, killing around a hundred security personnel daily. Armed ambushes of the security forces and attacks on their bases by military defectors increased. The regime's siege of Homs, where the armed opposition was entrenched, involved bombarding neighborhoods at a high cost in civilian casualties. In June and July, massacres in several Sunni villages on the fringes of the Alawite heartland were thought by some to be an attempt at sectarian cleansing aimed at making this area a fallback bastion for the regime should it lose control of the country. A weakening of the regime's core was signaled by high-level defections, notably by a Republican Guard commander from the Ba'thist Tlas family, which had long worked with the Asads. The bombing of a government building, killing four senior security officials, in the heart of upper-class Damascus signaled the failure of the regime's defenses and suggested opposition penetration at the heart of the security apparatus. In July and August 2012, major insurgent infiltrations of Damascus and Aleppo further undermined any pretense of normality, which was crucial for the regime to maintain support from the uncommitted. The regime responded with helicopter gunships and even jet fighters, indicating its inability to contain the insurgency. The sense of insecurity among the urban middle- and upper-middle classes greatly intensified, and many who could exit did so. The death toll from the intervention stood at 19,000 by July. Some 200,000 refugees had fled to neighboring countries, and 1.2 million Syrians were forced to flee their neighborhoods to escape the fighting. By summer 2012, Syria had descended into full-scale civil war, with no end in sight.

FOREIGN POLICY

Syrians consider their country the birthplace of Arab nationalism, and its tenets have considerably influenced Syria's foreign policy. This has manifested itself in Syria's role as the self-proclaimed leader of the anti-Israeli front in the Arab world, the most consistent proponent of the Palestinian cause, and the beacon of anti-imperialist pan-Arab neutrality in the region. Syria's sponsorship of Palestinian guerillas against Israel and inter-Arab rivalry for Arab nationalist leadership were factors in the outbreak of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, in which Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel. Ever since, recovery of this territory has been the primary driving force behind Syrian foreign policy.

The Golan Heights is geostrategically important for two reasons. First, control of the territory would give Syria the strategic advantage of looking down upon northern Israel—unless the Heights were demilitarized, as seems likely in any settlement. Second, as long as the Golan remains in Israeli hands, the Israeli military will be positioned only a short distance from Damascus on the flat, open Golan plateau. Mount Hermon, at the Golan's northwest corner, peers over much of southern Lebanon, northern Israel, southern Syria, and the Golan Heights itself. The Golan is also a major water source, as tributaries spring fed on the slopes of Mount Hermon feed through it into the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River, on which Israel depends.

Hafiz al-Asad and the Struggle with Israel: From War to Failed Peace

A realist, Asad was convinced Israel would never withdraw from the occupied territories unless military action upset the post-1967 status quo. The main thrust of his policy after coming to power in 1970 was therefore preparation for a conventional war to retake the Golan. Toward this end, the rebuilding of the shattered Syrian army was his first priority. He therefore maintained Syria's close alliance with the Soviet Union to secure arms, and he put aside the radicals' ideological cold war to forge new alliances with the Arab oil states to secure the financing needed for a military buildup. Finally, he struck a strategic alliance with Anwar Sadat's Egypt, the most militarily powerful of the Arab states, which shared Syria's interest in recovery of the occupied territories.

Egypt and Syria went to war with Israel in 1973 to break the stalemate over the occupied territories.

Although Syria failed to recover the Golan militarily, Syria and Egypt gained enhanced political leverage from their challenge to the pro-Israeli status quo and from the Arab oil embargo. Asad sought to exploit this new leverage to focus international pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories. He accepted Henry Kissinger's mediation of the Golan Heights disengagement negotiations while also conducting a war of attrition on the front with Israel as part of a “fighting while talking” bargaining strategy. He saw Syria's resulting 1974 disengagement agreement with Israel as a first step in total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. However, Sadat's subsequent separate deals with Israel undermined Syrian diplomatic leverage and shattered the Syro-Egyptian alliance needed to pressure Israel into a comprehensive settlement.

Syria's 1976 intervention in the Lebanese civil war against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was widely interpreted as serving Syrian reasons of state and even a “Greater Syria” project. Indeed, Asad aimed to head off various threats in Lebanon to Syria's position in the struggle with Israel. He used the civil war to insert Syria as Lebanon's arbiter, balancing between the various sides and tilting one way or the other depending on the strategic situation. He blocked a defeat of the Maronite Christians to deter their alignment with Israel. He prevented the emergence of a radical, Palestinian-dominated Lebanon that could give Israel an excuse to intervene militarily, possibly seizing southern Lebanon and positioning itself to threaten Syria's soft western flank. Syria's intervention allowed Asad to station his army in the Bekaa valley against this danger. Later, however, as the Maronites allied with Israel, Syria tilted toward Palestinian forces confronting Israel in southern Lebanon.

The Lebanon intervention was also part of Asad's attempt to construct a Syrian sphere of influence to substitute for the Egyptian alliance in the military and diplomatic struggle with Israel. Syria had always viewed Lebanon as a lost part of Greater Syria that should serve its Arab strategy. Moreover, whoever controlled Lebanon was in a strong position to control the PLO and hence the Palestinian card: Syria's bargaining leverage in the Arab-Israeli conflict would be greatly enhanced if it enjoyed the capacity to veto any settlement of the Palestinian problem that left Syria out or to overcome rejectionist Palestinian resistance to an acceptable settlement. The intervention did demonstrate Syrian moderation to the United States and Israel, better positioning Asad for such a settlement. But in continuing to insist on Palestinian rights and a comprehensive settlement, Asad passed up a chance to follow Sadat down the road of separate peace. Syria's role and alliances in Lebanon enabled it to put pressure on Israel through Hizballah. In time, Syria's presence in Lebanon also served as a source of patronage to reward key regime supporters.

Once Sadat's separate peace with Israel had exhausted the 1970s peace process and taken Egypt out of the Arab-Israeli power balance, Syria felt increasingly vulnerable. Asad used the Arab aid Syria received as the main remaining frontline state to finance a military buildup aiming at parity with Israel: the threat of an Israel emboldened by the neutralization of its southern front had to be contained, while the resumption of peace negotiations depended on restoration of the Arab-Israeli power balance. In the meantime, Damascus obstructed all attempts at partial or separate Israeli agreements with other states that tried to circumvent Syria: if Syria could not achieve an Arab-Israeli peace to its liking, it could at least prevent others that damaged its interests or Arab rights—hence Syria's role in the collapse of both the 1983 Lebanese-Israeli accord and the 1985 bid by Yasir Arafat and King Hussein of Jordan for negotiations with Israel under the Reagan Plan.

At the same time, the 1979 Islamic revolution was transforming Iran from an ally of Israel and the United States into a fiercely anti-Zionist state and potential Syrian ally in the Arab-Israeli power balance. Asad condemned the Iraqi invasion of Iran, predicting that it would divide and divert Arabs from the Israeli

menace. His stand with Iran was vindicated after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when the effectiveness of the Iran-sponsored Islamic resistance to Israel helped foil a mortal threat to Syria. Nevertheless, sensitive to Arab opinion, Asad actively discouraged Iranian threats to Iraqi territory.

Asad's adhesion to the Western-led war coalition in the 1990–1991 Gulf War was driven by multiple considerations of realpolitik. Saddam Hussein had made himself a considerable nuisance to Asad, notably supporting challenges to Syria's position in Lebanon; and success in Kuwait would enhance Saddam's capacity to seek revenge for Syria's stand with Iran in the Iran-Iraq War. Adhesion to the Gulf coalition gained US and Israeli tolerance of Asad's 1990 military intervention to establish a Pax Syrianna in Lebanon. Standing with Saudi Arabia revitalized the subsidy channel from the Gulf oil states that had dried up with the decline of oil prices and, enabling Syria to break out of Arab isolation due to its alignment with Iran, put Syria back at the heart of a renewed Cairo-Damascus-Riyadh axis.

Ultimately, however, Syria's decision to join the anti-Iraq coalition was most definitively shaped by the emerging breakdown of the bipolar world. By the 1990s, the withdrawal of the Soviet Union as a reliable protector and arms supplier deprived Syria of the ability to pose a credible threat of war against Israel and left it vulnerable to Western animosity for its obstruction of the peace process in the 1980s and particularly for its alleged resort to terrorism, which Israel could exploit to justify an attack on Syria. Asad understood that Syria's struggle with Israel would henceforth have to take a chiefly diplomatic form, and that required détente with the United States, which alone had leverage over Israel. Asad needed to get the United States to accept Syria as the key to peace and stability in the Middle East, and the Gulf War presented an opportunity to trade membership in the coalition—whose credibility arguably required Syria's nationalist credentials—in return for US promises to broker an acceptable Arab-Israeli settlement.

After the war Asad joined the Madrid peace process—a strategic decision to do what was necessary to obtain an acceptable settlement with Israel. This was made much easier after the Oslo Accords relieved Damascus of the responsibility to make its recovery of the Golan Heights contingent on the satisfaction of Palestinian rights. In the peace negotiations, Asad aimed to minimize the “normalization of relations” and security concessions Israel expected in return for the Golan. But once Israel signaled its willingness to return the Golan, Syria put forth a formula under which the more land Israel conceded, the more peace it could have, and made several concessions, such as stating its willingness to open diplomatic relations after a settlement and its acceptance of demilitarized zones on the border that would favor Israel. In fact, the two sides came very close to a settlement. But a final deal was obstructed by Israel's demands to keep its surveillance station on Mount Hermon and its insistence on keeping 5 percent of the Golan's territory adjoining Lake Tiberias.

Foreign Policy Under Bashar al-Asad

Bashar al-Asad came to power in the same year as the collapse of Syria's peace negotiations with Israel. His legitimacy was contingent on his faithfulness to his father's mission of recovering the Golan, but he inherited a deteriorating strategic situation: a new Turkish-Israeli alliance and growing opposition to Syrian forces remaining in Lebanon following Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. Without its former Soviet arms supplier, Syria could not sustain the conventional military balance with Israel, and a growing technological and airpower gap opened between the two countries. In response, Bashar tried to construct compensating alliances: he sought a strategic opening to Europe, negotiating Syrian membership in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. At the regional level, Syria initially remained in loose alliance with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, improved relations with Turkey, and in 2001 started an opening to Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Toward Israel, Asad affirmed that Syria was willing to resume peace negotiations if Israel acknowledged Yitzhak Rabin's commitment to a full withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, borders on the Golan. But once the rise of Ariel Sharon to power in Israel had pushed a settlement off the agenda, Asad revived Syrian militancy, insisting that a Syrian-Israeli settlement had to be linked to the establishment of a Palestinian state, allowing Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad to maintain offices in Syria, and supporting Hizballah operations against Israeli forces in Shebaa Farms, a disputed enclave in southern Lebanon. Given the strategic imbalance with Israel, Syria now relied on "nonconventional" deterrence strategies—Hizballah's asymmetric warfare capability and Syrian missiles with chemical warheads—but Israel still made several limited retaliatory strikes on Syrian positions. Syria made massive arms deliveries to Hizballah during its summer 2006 conflict with Israel, thereby helping deprive Israel of a military victory in Lebanon. But Bashar also pursued Turkish-brokered peace talks with Israel, which were aborted by Israel's 2009 attack on Gaza.

Syrian-US relations dramatically declined under the George W. Bush administration. After 9/11, Bush announced that all states not with the United States in the war on terror were foes. Syria objected to the US designation of what it regarded as national liberation movements—Palestinian militants and Hizballah—as terrorist. It regarded these groups as "cards" in its struggle with Israel and evaded US demands that it cease its support for them. Syrian-US relations worsened further when Syria helped Iraq evade US attempts to isolate Baghdad by reopening the closed oil pipeline between the two states, gaining the Syrian treasury a badly needed billion-dollar annual windfall and enabling Saddam to evade UN sanctions.

The immediate catalyst of a crisis in US-Syrian relations was Syrian opposition to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. At the United Nations and in the Arab League, Syrian diplomats attempted to delegitimize the invasion. Asad allowed Arab resistance fighters to move across Syria's border into Iraq and gave refuge to Iraqi Ba'th officials. His defiance of Washington over the war reflected Syria's Arab nationalist identity and was costly for the regime. Washington attacked Syrian economic interests in Iraq and moved against its position in Lebanon. However, while Hafiz al-Asad had been rewarded for siding with the United States in the 1991 war with a US commitment to pursue the peace process, no such offer was on the table in 2003. And while Iraq had been the aggressor against another Arab state in 1990, an Arab state was the victim of imperialist aggression in 2003, as Syrians saw it. Indeed, Syrian public opinion was so inflamed against the 2003 US invasion that regime legitimacy dictated opposition. This was a more important consideration for Bashar al-Asad, whose rule was still unconsolidated, than it had been for his father in 1990.

After triumphing over Saddam Hussein, the United States presented Damascus with a list of nonnegotiable demands that threatened Syria's vital interests: to end support for Palestinian militants, dismantle Hizballah, withdraw from Lebanon, and cooperate with the occupation of Iraq—in short, to give up its cards in the struggle over the Golan, its sphere of influence in the Levant, and its Arab nationalist stature in the Arab world. Syria did end its overt support for the resistance in Iraq but otherwise sought to trade cooperation over Iraq for US respect for Syrian interests, notably in the conflict with Israel. US difficulties in Iraq gave Syria a certain space for maneuver between defying and submitting to US demands. However, the cost of defiance was US economic sanctions that obstructed aspects of the regime's economic liberalization by discouraging Western banks and companies from doing business in Syria.

In 2005, Syria's role in Lebanon became an issue of conflict with the West. The United States and France engineered UN Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for Syria to withdraw its military forces

from that country. Syria reluctantly acquiesced. After the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, the United States and France set up an international tribunal to investigate Syria's role in the killing, which Damascus saw as an effort to foment regime change in Syria. After Syria withdrew from Lebanon, that country became a battleground in a wider struggle pitting the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia against Hizballah, backed by Syria and Iran. In May 2008, Hizballah demonstrated its power by taking over western Beirut, leading to the formation of a national unity government in which Hizballah held veto power over any moves by Lebanon against Syria.

A major consequence of Syria's stands in the Iraq and Lebanon conflicts was a shift in regional alignments, with Syria becoming estranged from its traditional Arab partners, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Bashar was highly critical of these countries' acquiescence in the US invasion of Iraq, and they, in turn, blamed Syria and Iran for the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war and the Hariri assassination. By 2006, a battle for the Middle East was being waged between two axes—a “moderate” one led by the United States and backed by the European Union, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, with Israel an unofficial partner, and a “resistance front” led by Iran and Syria, aligned with Hizballah and Hamas and enjoying wide support in Arab public opinion. Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine were the main battlegrounds for the rival alliances. As Syria faced isolation in the West as a pariah state, its links with Iran and other members of this “radical” axis strengthened.

At the same time, Syria moved into close alignment with formerly hostile Turkey. In the 1990s the two states had come to the brink of war, as Syria supported the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) against Turkey to pressure Ankara into giving it a greater share of Euphrates River water controlled by new Turkish dams upstream. Turkey and Israel also had cooperated closely in opposition to Syria and Iran. Military threats by Turkey in 1996 caused Syria to abandon its support for the PKK, and Turkish-Syrian relations then improved. The empowerment of Iraqi Kurds with the US-Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003 gradually drove Turkey and Syria closer over the shared threat of Kurdish separatism. Turkey refused US demands to isolate Syria and even brokered Syria-Israel peace negotiations in defiance of the United States. By the end of 2008, Bashar had outlasted his main nemesis, George W. Bush, and was enjoying a cautious improvement in relations with Europe and the United States under the new administration of Barack Obama.

The 2011 uprising, however, reshuffled the cards and unleashed a struggle for Syria. Syria is a pivotal Arab state. When united under Hafiz al-Asad, it became a regional player able to punch well above its weight. When divided, as in the 1950s and again with the 2011 uprising, it becomes an arena for struggle among external forces, all trying to use Syria to shift the regional balance of power in their favor.

At stake in the 2011 uprising are Syria's relations with the West, specifically the balance between the pro-Western Sunni axis, led by Saudi Arabia, and the Iran-led “resistance front.” While the uprising is essentially indigenous, external forces have tried from the beginning to use it to their advantage. Qatar has used Al Jazeera to amplify antiregime protests. The Saudis have funneled money and arms to Syrian tribes and, with the United States, smuggled into the country sophisticated mobile phones able to bypass government-controlled networks. In November 2011, Qatar and Saudi Arabia took the initiative in prompting the Arab League to take unprecedented moves to isolate Syria, which, together with European sanctions, were aimed at drying up the regime's access to economic resources and breaking its coalition with the business class. An anti-Asad coalition, led by the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, began financing, training, and arming insurgents and infiltrating them into the country. As Syria became a failed state, it became a magnet for jihadis and al-Qaida militants, some funded or armed from the Gulf. Its links to its Shi'a partners—Hizballah to the west and Iraq and Iran to the east—

were the Asad regime's only chance of slipping out of this tightening stranglehold. Meanwhile, Russia and China, antagonized by the West's use of a UN humanitarian resolution to promote regime change at their expense in Libya, protected Syria from a similar scenario. Whichever way the current version of the struggle for Syria goes, it will, as formerly, be decisive in the parallel struggle for the Middle East.

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Hinnebusch, R., & Lesch, D. W. (2013). Syrian Arab Republic. In M. Gasiorowski, D. E. Long, & B. Reich, *The government and politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (7th ed.). New York, NY: Westview Press.
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MLA

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