

Asad and After: Syria Between Continuity and Change

My talk today will be rather informal and will be focusing on domestic issues, particularly what can be called palace politics, rather than on regional, institutional, or political-economic factors. This presentation is based on an ongoing research on Syria's political-economy, specifically, on the impact of informal ties between capitalists and politicians on developmental patterns. This summer I was in Syria and witnessed the first phase of the transitional process.

“Change within Continuity”

After Asad's death, the gaze of citizens and observers of Syria turned to the helm of the Ba`thist regime to see what transpires: principally, whether power will transfer smoothly to his son Bashar. Equally important, though, Syria analysts focused on post-Asad events to answer a plethora of questions about the nature of the regime that they have been asking and “answering” without much certainty for the past three decades. Within a couple of weeks after Asad's departure, it became obvious that transfer of power to Bashar proceeded smoothly—smoother than most analysts predicted. What remains to be seen is whether the post-transition period would be as peaceful, and whether the transition of power to Bashar was indeed complete. And though it is too early to draw conclusions, some of the lingering questions about the “closed” regime and “enigmatic” leader are becoming easier to answer, questions such as the institutionalization of the regime, the legitimacy and mobilizational effect of the Ba`th party, the success of Asad in weaving a coalition of supporters and beneficiaries that are bound to the existing regime, the extent to which Syrians believed in the regime's rhetoric, and the all important question of the indispensability of Asad to Syria. So far, it seems that Asad's regime was successful in building a state, fragile as it may be, but a state with institutions that ensure a peaceful succession in a country that is historically wrought with coup d'états, conflicting forces, and external interference. Notwithstanding the contention that the region itself and the major power broker in the Middle East, i.e. the United States, are tending toward “peace” and stability, not revolution, the country's populist-authoritarian institutions survived their principal architect. The fact that these institutions lack autonomy and efficacy is not all that unusual in an authoritarian regime. Nonetheless, questions regarding the nature of the succession and the future of a state burdened with a deteriorating economy, a suppressed civil society, and a narrow leadership loom large.

True, Bashar and supporters succeeded in dodging some major initial hurdles during the first phase of the post-Asad transition, but what about the coming challenges? Both the domestic economy and regional peace seem to be failing. To tackle these challenges in the second phase of the transition requires, at the very least, a united leadership with a clearly defined vision. Does that exist in Syria today? If not, i.e., if the schisms within the regime grow, I contend that the political game will open up to include hitherto excluded social forces, including liberal conservatives, civil society advocates, and even moderate Islamists.

I shall focus on this question of elite cohesion by looking at both the official and unofficial narratives of the critical events leading up to the transfer of power. But first, I will survey some of the most significant changes of the first four months after Asad.

Post-Asad Policies and Change: June-September

- 1) A presidential decision was issued to remove all pictures of the president from non-governmental buildings. (Series of announcements beginning in mid-July)
- 2) Other presidential decrees aimed at reactivating media institutions by replacing editors and managers, encouraging a change in media rhetoric, and urging media reporters to eliminate exaggerated embellishments when the political elite is discussed. (27 July)
- 3) There were several public presidential promises to activate the role of the National Front Parties (the 7-party coalition led by the Ba`th), a promise more significant for the implicit acknowledgement of the hitherto rubber-stamp function of these parties than for whatever may actually change.
- 4) The President announced on August 18 that he will declare amnesty regarding a significant number of political prisoners, mostly from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Party of Communist Action.
- 5) There were announcements in mid-August of plans to make adjustments within the new government in September—we have seen none yet.
- 6) On August 19, an important presidential decree confirmed the vice-presidency of Khaddam and Zuheir Mashaarqa, but without "specifying their missions," i.e., stripping them of missions, functions, or "files" for which they were previously responsible. This is considered a soft but sure blow against the old guard.
- 7) On August 27, the government announced a 25% raise in the minimum wages and salaries of 1.4 million public sector workers (with their families, they constitute 45-50% of the Syrian population of 17 million). The last such raise occurred in 1994 (30%), but was literally gobbled up by dramatic inflation in 1994-96. (The salary of a Lebanese Parliament Member is thirty times her/his counterpart in Syria).
- 8) In early September, a high level official "asked" an already active group of intellectuals, economists, and industrialists to form "The Association of the Friends of Civil Society" in anticipation of new party-system laws. The association was indeed formed and had its first meeting in the house of a prominent industrialist who has been and outspoken critic of government policies. Another group formed "The Association for Protecting the Environment."
- 9) On September 2nd, a bold prominent Damascene business-man turned politician made a bold announcement regarding his intent to establish what he calls a "Liberal Conservative" party, since, as he declared, "the Front parties are of one color, either socialist or communist, rendering the celebrated political pluralism incomplete." This is a first in Syria.

10) Beginning in September 16 and ongoing, the Ba`thist leadership announced the replacement of all members of several Ba`thist branches across Syria, from Damascus to Homs to Aleppo, Latakia, Swaida, etc.

11) Finally, for the first time in nearly four decades, a statement was released on September 26 by 99 Syrian intellectuals, journalists, and professionals, calling on the authorities to “cancel the state of emergency,” which had been in place since 1963, and to declare amnesty for all political prisoners. The statement emphasized the need for modernization, democracy, the rule of law, and the freedom of organization and expression. Most significantly, the statement emphasized the importance of a comprehensive approach to all challenges ahead.

The Official Narrative

The official narrative of the events of Spring 2000 in Syria tells a depoliticized procedural story. Suddenly, after thirteen years under Prime Minister Al-Zo`bi, the Ba`thist leadership discovers that the government was both corrupt and inefficient, notwithstanding a period of numeric economic growth in the early 1990s. It was time to replace the government and set the country on a course of change and reform, a decision that echoes both the President’ call for modernization in 1999 and Bashar Asad’s “campaign” against corruption. The two long weeks it took to form the government were a result of painstaking effort to appoint the right individuals. Finally a compromise, but two-thirds new, government emerged under the leadership of former Aleppan mayor Mustafa Miro, a Ph.D. in Arabic literature and a man not known in that city to be “untarnished.”

Shortly after the government was in place, the campaign against corruption escalated dramatically to reach former Prime Minister Al-Zu`bi. He was immediately ejected as a member of both the Ba`th party and its regional command upon official reports that accuse him of being “heavily involved” in corruption and of committing acts “that conflict with the values, morals, and principles of the party and constitute a transgression of the law, creating severe damages to the reputation of the party and state and to the national economy.” A long list of associates and other “corrupt” officials was drafted and people were arrested or “called in” in the dozens. Most significant among those were the former Deputy Prime Minister for economic affairs Salim Yassin and Minister of Transportation, Mufid Abd-ul-Karim. Unable to deal with the scandalous situation, Zu`bi committed suicide in his home in Damascus, the story goes (close observers reject the “suicide” scenario in favor of murder committed by those who were sure to be exposed if Zo`bi spoke freely. Zo`bi headed one of the most extensive crony networks in Syria because of his critically powerful position and *laissez faire* stance vis-à-vis corrupt practices. In short, it is the old guard who benefited from his death and it is not unlikely that the regime let it happen to avoid a larger scandal).

As the Regional Command Conference drew closer in late May, reports began to surface to the effect that the roots of corruption are even deeper within the regime, reaching the military apparatus. Additional lists, including higher level officials and military commanders, were drawn for further legal action, starting with preventing them from leaving the country. Particularly, a peculiar news item appeared in a regional newspaper

announcing that former Syrian Chief of Staff Hikmat Al-Shihabi is going to be put on trial for his involvement in corruption. Within forty-eight hours, Al-Shihabi departed from Beirut's airport headed towards California where his son resides. The press emphasized the fact that Syrian Vice President Halim Khaddam and former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri saw Al-Shihabi off at the airport, revealing the longstanding alliance between Hariri and the icons of the Ba`thist old guard.

A few days later, on 10 June 2000, the world—Syria, definitely—was shocked with news of Asad's death, despite knowledge of his increasingly failing health. The Syrian Parliament happened to be in session that evening. Its president, Abdul-Qader Qaddura, announced the president's death at approximately 6:15 p.m., fifteen minutes after the Syrian television station did the same for the first time, and proceeded to modify the Syrian constitution to allow for lowering the age of prospective presidents from forty to thirty-four. The local media announced Mustafa Tlas, Minister of defense, as the official who would take over the affairs of the president until the Parliament meets on 25 June to elect a president who would then be put to a public referendum. The following day, the local media announced that Mustafa Miro would take over the affairs of the President until such time. Finally, the media settled on Khaddam as the individual serving this duty but from his position as vice president. Article 85 of the Syrian constitution is clear about the immediate elevation of the vice president to the presidency in case of the president's death. This explains why Khaddam was not given full constitutional authority to exercise the duties of the president in the interim period. On that day, the vice president issued 3 decrees, including decree number 10, which promoted Bashar's army rank to allow him to become the Commander in Chief of the Syrian Armed Forces.

A week later, the planned Regional Command Conference (RCC) was held. The conference served three principle purposes: electing Bashar as successor to president Asad; electing the 21 member body that constitutes the Regional Command (i.e., the effective government in Syria) and a 90 member body that constitutes the central command, a supervisory body over the former; and charting the political and economic path for the future of the country.

Far less than the expected and announced two-thirds change in the ranks of the twenty-one Regional Command members, only eight members were displaced, presumably as a result of compromise between old and new forces. Twelve new members entered the Regional Command, since four seats were already empty. Bashar was elected to the Regional Command. From the military complex, only three (as opposed to four previously) were elected to the regional command and sixteen to the central command. Sectarian representation in the Regional Command was somewhat proportional to that of the larger population, with three Alawis and two Christians. Most peculiar is the exclusion of Bahgat Sulaiman (Bashar's mentor and head of Counter-Intelligence) and Asef Shawkat (Bashar's brother-in-law and head of the Security of the Armed Forces) from both bodies. Whatever the explanation may be, it is not that they lack power.

The Other Narrative

What the official narrative of change and succession leaves out is the complete list of motivations and calculations behind the changes that took place and the delicate balances of power and circumstances that *kept* Bashar at the top. To begin with, the drive against corruption, which started in 1998 and bloomed in early 2000 has been primarily motivated

by the goal of paving the way for the successorship of Bashar, who was believed by Asad to be the sole candidate capable and willing to pursue a similar course of policies in key areas, particularly with regards to regional peace and internal opposition. More immediately, Asad could entrust Bashar more than any other individual in maintaining his balancing act and safeguarding the knowledge/information that undergirds it.

What Was Asad's Balancing Game at the Top?

There was always more to Asad's wish than passing power over to his son. Though Asad ruled ruthlessly at times, he maintained throughout his rule a magnificent set of dynamic power balances that kept all other centers of power at bay. No one at the top knew exactly how Asad felt towards him. Each power pole within the regime had a function of sorts (For example, Asad would not allow members of the security services to deal directly and officially with foreign officials—precluding Lebanon—nor with local officials as such, and would designate different governmental and military heads for different functions and purposes not in accordance with their official title, but according to the type of missions, including diplomatic, confrontational, disciplinary, and outright combative ones. This latter division of missions, for instance, coincides with the following personalities respectively: Share`, Khaddam, Tlas, Haidar/Rif at). Each function was balanced against another power pole that carries a similar function in a manner that bred controlled competitiveness and imparted thereby a modicum of integrity to the respective institution from which these power centers hail. The balancing game took into account the sheer mobilizational and motivational power of such power centers, but it also took into account social background (region, religion, sect, class), loyalty, and personality type (For instance, Asad appoints loyal or unthreatening Sunnis to balance questionable Alawi power centers while reserving the Christians for roles that require impartiality and unbiased judgements—this is usually motivated by self-interest given the strategic vulnerability of the Christian minority. The comparatively weakest personalities often fill the highest ranks and, to an extent, vice versa, especially when loyalty to the president or to the regime is in question. The key to this web of balances is that the legitimacy of the power centers as individual positions was tied to the president in one way or another, or alternatively, owed more to the president than it did to any other single individual as such. Asad held the ropes and connected the dots to link or delink various power centers: this is personalized corporatism par excellence. Over a period of six years, and more than any other kind of knowledge in statesmanship that Asad may have passed on to Bashar, he passed on the logic and dynamics of his balancing act on which the stability, and at times survival, of the Asad regime rested for three decades.

How Did Asad Hand Over the Ropes?

As Asad's health deteriorated towards the end of the 1990s, preparations for Bashar's successorship escalated only to encounter resistance from some of the most potent power centers who share an alternative scenario that includes a much greater role for themselves as longstanding defenders of the regime. Principal among these power centers were/are Abdul-Halim Khaddam, Hikmat Al-Shihabi, and Ali Duba, head of Military Intelligence. The latter two retired in time (Shihabi in summer of 1998, Duba in January 2000), as opposed to loyal generals who were given extensions beyond the retirement age—e.g. Tlas, Aslan. Khaddam was being stripped of his responsibilities in a piecemeal manner, handing over one "file" or *malaf* after another to Bashar, particularly what came to be known as the

“Lebanon File.” Khaddam was viewed as less threatening and more corrupt than the two military men, and was thus easier to remove from office when the time came. In the meantime, he represented the muted opposition, the Sunnis, the old guard, the bate, and the loyal vice president, all at once. More importantly, he represented the lingering power center that served a non-threatening civilian balancing force. Although the president’s death beat the removal of Khaddam in chronological terms, it did not leave Bashar to contend with a powerful Chief of Staff or a gruesome head of Military Intelligence as bidders for power. Hence the mastery of the Asad’s calculations which, all along since the drive to remove potential opponents, made it appear to those who retained their positions that the “removals” or “forced retirements” were over. Asad retained the balance after every “removal” such that it could very well be the last such step in case of his imminent death. The game was facilitated by the fact that potential opponents to the successorship of Bashar were not always vocal about it—precluding Shihabi—and thus continuing to occupy their positions was not viewed as an embarrassing contradiction, e.g. Generals Ali Aslan, Shafiq Fayyad, and Ibrahim Safi. What is significant about these generals compared to others in the Army and security services is that their loyalty to Bashar is not unquestionable.

**The Formula at Work:
Anti-Bashar= Corruption**

After the failure of the Shepherdstown meetings in bringing complete peace between Syria and Israel, the Syrian regime turned its gaze inward to take care of business. Business meant clearing the way for Bashar, which included a change in government, the removal of obstacles (opposition power-centers), and finally a Regional Command Conference which elects Bashar to the Regional Command and perhaps to the vice-presidency. In short, after clearing the way in the military and security services, the time had come to tackle the government and the party. The job was not as easy as Asad had wanted. There seemed to be a substantial opposition both in the government and the party because of the potential threat that change may bring to these institutions and to the coalition of beneficiaries that are closely tied to them. Furthermore, the party is the bastion of the old guard whose interests are generally tied with the system as it stands, with the primacy of the party, the public sector, and their sinecures and special powers that extended to the cabinet as it stood. Hence, the “discovery” that the cabinet, especially the prime minister, is corrupt and inefficient—all true—and needs to be dissolved and replaced.

Nonetheless, Asad was keen not to disrupt the balance even within the new cabinet, a largely administrative and often defunct body of weak ministries. The selection of an alternative Prime Minister that fit the customary profile for the job since 1987—a “yes man” with a tarnished reputation, but also a loyal friend—was not an easy task, but was finally accomplished. The resulting cabinet was a compromise of sorts between two main forces: what Bashar wanted (new youthful, modernizing blood) and what Asad wanted (a semblance of continuity to safeguard the balancing game). The new cabinet clearly reflected the direction in which Syria’s politics was headed, at least in terms of loyalty to Bashar if not explicit reform projects. The campaign against corruption continued and served the function of a sword for purging potential anti-Bashar forces in the lower- and middle-levels of the bureaucracy and the party in preparation for the Regional Command Conference. The last such sword-swing was potentially aimed at Al-Shihabi, amongst calls from the public for reaching deeper and wider into the regime for “corrupt” practices in the present and in

the past. But only the (potential) opponents of Bashar were discovered to be corrupt. Shihabi's departure to the United States was a compromise of sorts, which implicated Khaddam as he saw him off officially at the airport. The stage was set for a dramatic change in personnel at the RCC. But nature thought otherwise. As discussed above, Asad's death altered the balance of power, but without dethroning Bashar. Asad's death couldn't have come at a worst time. Whereas the Conference was assumed to be akin to putting the "party on trial" and removing the last obstacle, Khaddam, it turned out instead to be an affair in which Khaddam and the party were able to find a quite respectable niche within the emerging power formula, but firmly under the leadership of Bashar. Though beginning in 1998 the party was revived by Asad to provide a smooth and legal-rational transitional base for Bashar, it became everyone's life-jacket in June 2000. Bashar is afloat at the top—but the fate of the entire ship is not yet known. The sword of anti-corruption is likely to strike everyone at the top if it is waved once more. The most sizeable corruption files are, for all intents and purposes, closed for the time being.

The Temporary Outcome

As the formula stands, Bashar is everyone's "favorite" candidate, even his potential enemies', e.g. the old guard and the Islamists. The reason is simple: first, he enjoys the kind of public support that no other single force, much less individual, is likely to garner; secondly, this period is so wrought with uncertainty that no other contender is willing to pose a direct challenge because of the potential of "burning" themselves, as they say in Syria, i.e. prematurely exposing their intentions. The Rif at "interference," usually stimulated by outsiders (Saudi or American connections), was a lost and miserable card that had the reverse effect of bolstering Bashar's comparative legitimacy. People in Syria were reminded of the all-powerful logic of "sticking to the best option among the worst." In short, no one near the strings of power has an interest in or the means for challenging Bashar at the moment. The word that one hears repeatedly from insiders is that even the staunchest opposition within the old guard welcomes Bashar at this point, but "Bashar . . . along with us and not instead of us," (*ma`na mou badalna*) as the conclusion above indicates.

Concluding Remarks: Will Bashar Make it in the Medium Run?

Initially, it seems that Bashar was able to pull together enough strings to rule. Or so it appears. What most analysts are predicting though is a tough second stage, when the "transition" becomes a thing of the past, and active rule becomes necessary in the crucial areas that have been awaiting an executive decision: peace, economy, and the political nature of the new era. Many questions arise, but they can be condensed into two broad ones. Will Bashar stir the winds of change and risk confronting the "old guard" when his rule is young and fragile? Or will he succumb to a risk-free path without change in the name of "stability" and compromise, and risk disappointing the public and losing the broad support he now enjoys? Clearly no answer can be given at this stage without a sober assessment of what is going for him and against him.

Bashar has been handed over a tough job run by a tough crowd whose interests are often tied to current arrangements. Any change in any area is likely to damage the interests of some power center. Hence the importance of strategy and the organization of stages according to, first, the priorities of rule, and, second, the series of steps that must be taken

to establish the infrastructure of reform (e.g. law, administration). The first serves to consolidate his power and the second bolsters his popular support which he is likely to depend on shortly. If all fails, an elaborate security network backs Bashar, or perhaps others.

As matters stand today, Bashar has the loyalty of nearly all heads of the more than nine security branches which are divided into two main umbrella institutions: **the Military Intelligence Department** (*shi`bit al-mukhabaraat `askariyyah*), headed by Hassan Khalil (since January 2000, after the “retirement” of Ali Duba) and includes primarily; the Security of the Armed Forces Branch (*amn al-quwaat al-musallaha*) headed by Asif Shawkat; the Security and Investigative Apparatus for the Syrian Forces in Lebanon (*jihaz al-amn wal-istitlaa`*), headed by Ghazi Kan`aan. The other principal umbrella institutions is **the General Security Administration** (*idarat al-mukhabaraat al-`aamah*) headed by Ali Al-Huari, and includes among others: the Counter-Intelligence Branch (*firi` mukafahat al-jasusiyah*), headed by Dr. Bahgat Suleiman; the Internal Security Branch (*firi` al-amn al-dakhili*); the Political Security Branch (*firi` al-amn al-siyasi*), headed by Adnan Bader Hassan).

In the Army, the situation is more critical, but not necessarily for long. The Chief of Staff Ali Aslan was said to be on the way out as he was practically relieved from his duties sometime in late April or early May 2000. But the President’s death reversed this situation for the time being. It is unclear exactly why Aslan was not in favor recently, but in any case he was not and is not at this point threatening since Bashar has established firm relations with his junior staff whom he personally promoted or selected throughout the course of the past six years. The same goes for the other three generals who practically control the Syrian Army: particularly Shafiq Fayyad and Ibrahim Safi, the head of the Syrian Armed Forces stationed in Lebanon, both of whom are on their way out. Their assistants, all Bashar loyalists, are being groomed to replace them. The exception seems to be General Ahmad Abdul Nabi, a Sunni who has a cleaner reputation and who is said to be a contender for Aslan’s position the next time Army positions are up for evaluation/promotion on 1 January 2001. On 1 July 2000, Bashar promoted his brother Maher and other loyalists at the expense of other officers who are becoming out of favor in the eyes of the new leadership.

Bureaucratically, Bashar has surrounded himself with a team of younger technocrats who are eager for change . . . at this point. The cabinet reflects this new blood in most instances, but some old guard loyalists remain, e.g. Minister of Finance, Al-Mahayni. For his part, Al-`Imadi has been ready to leave for some time now but the President opted otherwise in March when the Cabinet was formed. It is said that Al-`Imadi wanted to protect his growing wealth by moving away from formal office and from politics altogether, a new phenomenon in Syria. In any case, the upcoming cabinet reshuffle after the public “election” of Bashar (with a 97.2 % “win”) is likely to complete Bashar’s team with the exception of a couple of ministries that would serve a balancing function between continuity and change.

On the other side of the ledger, the picture is murky but not unreadable. Among the most recurring criticisms of Bashar are those that point to his non-charismatic, some say non-commanding personality. More concretely, however, is the potential opposition within the “revived” party that crawls with particularist and old guard networks who can become powerful in unexpected twists of events brought about by Bashar’s presidential initiatives.

This could take place especially if army generals and security forces (new or old) find that Bashar is undermining their institutions. There still seems to be a lack of a credible alternative pole, however. A fact that may lead to overestimating Bashar's power in the coming months. Another drawback to the current formula is the regional map: there are signs already that Syria may fall back into the old pattern of being jockeyed by powerful neighbors and enemies, i.e. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, not to mention the U.S. which hegemonizes all three. This is all the more possible in light of the withdrawal of Israel from southern Lebanon, which left Syria with a diminished local and regional leverage especially amidst calls from nearly everywhere for its own withdrawal therefrom (so it is erroneous to attribute Syria's diminished role in Lebanon to Asad's death).

In the meantime, Bashar, Bahgat Suleiman, Asif Shawkat, and a small network of advisors and security and army officers are carefully attempting to steer the country. However, nearly every change that has occurred is, and I think, must be seen as, a compromise of sorts between Bashar's camp and entrenched political, military, and economic networks. In sum, it does not look like there's sufficient elite cohesion for the economic and political challenges that confront Syria. Regionally, Bashar has a better chance to lead Syria if his administration maintains, and toughens, Asad's stance vis-à-vis Israel. Going back to my contention above, I think we will see a broader political game being played in Syria. Unlike the Asad years, the prospect of regional peace is likely to become a catalyst for domestic change—I say, keep your eyes focused on the Syrian-Lebanese border: once shut, internal change will dramatically accelerate in all directions. (Lebanon being an economic outlet and a political tool that stretches Syria's power and reach).