



USIPeace Briefing

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Syria and Political Change II

This is the second in a series of USIPeace Briefings written by Scott Lasensky and Mona Yacoubian of USIP's Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention. It is based on discussions at a recent seminar. The views expressed do not reflect those of USIP, which does not take policy positions.

One year after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and facing mounting international pressure, the Syrian regime is consolidating its hold on power and adopting a more defiant stance, both in the region and toward the West. On December 12, Lebanese journalist Gibran Tueni—who had been staunchly opposed to Syrian involvement in Lebanon—was killed by a car bomb in Beirut. The attack occurred amidst continued Syrian intimidation of key witnesses as well as an orchestrated Syrian campaign to discredit the UN's Hariri investigation. Then, in a late December interview on al-Arabiya, former Syrian Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam accused the Syrian regime of directly threatening Hariri just before his death.¹ Khaddam is now openly calling for regime change, even reaching out to exiled leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. In February 2006, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice criticized the Syrian government for encouraging violence and inflaming popular anger over the Danish cartoon controversy.

Main Points:

- The regime continues to consolidate its grip on power, but with a narrowing base of support among the ruling elite. At present, hardliners are in the ascendancy.
- President Bashar al-Assad finds himself between two competing mindsets: one anti-American and pan-Arab; the other, pro-reform and Western-oriented. Bashar favors the former, which remains the regime's default position.
- Syrians may not like the current regime, but, in view of the situation in neighboring Iraq, they prefer stability to chaos.
- The opposition will no longer settle for reform, but is coalescing around the demand for regime change. One of its next steps is to organize a "general national congress."

Consolidating Power

Hardliners appear to be in the ascendancy in Syria today. Sensing that external pressure was diminishing, the regime resorted to greater repressive measures during the period between the release of the second UN report and former Vice President Khaddam's initial accusations in December. The government imprisoned opposition figures and banned lectures and meetings, among other measures. While the regime appears to have made a series of mis-steps, particularly in the area of public diplomacy, it is clear that Bashar has consolidated power since the June 2005 Baath party Congress. However, questions remain: Can Bashar be brought back to a path of reform and

¹ See *Washington Post*, "Syrian Ex-Official Says Assad Threatened Hariri." December 31, 2005.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/30/AR2005123001330.html>. Accessed February 23, 2006.

cooperation with the West, or will he persist with what appears to be his more comfortable position of pan-Arab spoiler?

A central dynamic within the regime since the early days of Bashar's ascendance to power has been the struggle between him and the Syrian power structure in Lebanon. Early on, the Syrian president realized that he needed to neutralize this alternate power structure, embodied by a Saudi-Beirut-Syrian triangle rooted in graft and patronage. Bashar gave up Lebanon in order to consolidate power in Syria. This past June, following the Baath Party Congress and Khaddam's decision to leave Syria, it appeared that Bashar had finally emerged the victor in his five-year long battle against Khaddam and members of the "old guard" who were deeply enmeshed in Lebanese affairs.

Furthermore, Syria is confident that dynamics in the region are going its way. The regime does not believe sanctions are likely and feels that it can act with impunity, as evidenced by the Tueni assassination (which some link to Syria). Moreover, the regime believes U.S. policy is floundering and that it can outlast Washington in the region, particularly as chaos continues in Iraq. Likewise, the Saudis have calculated that a stable Syria is better than the chaos (and Shia-ascendancy) of Iraq.

Understanding Bashar

Despite having lived in London for 18 months and initially appearing as a pro-Western modernizer, Bashar is reacting against these impulses, instead adopting a pan-Arab nationalist stance. This worldview was in evidence during his emotive speech at the Beirut 2002 Arab summit, which was marked by anti-Israel, anti-Western rhetoric. And it is increasingly evident today, such as in his defiant speech at Damascus University (after the release of the first UN report in October 2005). Indeed, it is increasingly apparent that the real Bashar al-Assad identifies more readily with an anti-Western mindset.

Bashar appears utterly resigned to the notion that the United States will not let up on him. He is frustrated, sensing that the old rules of the game, "mixing honey and vinegar," no longer apply. Instead, he is convinced the United States is out to get him. Increased American pressure has weakened elements in the regime who seek to engage Washington. Opposition elements are also constrained, since they cannot be seen as allied with the United States.

Molded by Bashar, the Baath party remains an institutional prop for the regime. Indeed, the post-Hariri environment in Syria has been marked by regime consolidation. Some members of the "old guard" who posed a threat, such as Khaddam and Kanaan, were removed. Bashar may be "green," and mistake-prone in some ways, but he is not weak. Initially, power centers in Syria were compartmentalized into different sinecures (e.g. Lebanon); however, the recent crisis has forced Bashar to reign in and consolidate these fiefs. He is now more front and center and has embraced the Mukhabarat (secret police) culture through the party and the security apparatus.

Likened to an "Iran-lite," Syria is adopting a more antagonistic stance toward the United States, instead turning toward the East, specifically Russia, China, and India. The Tueni assassination could be interpreted as an example of Syrian defiance. While many question its timing, it could be viewed as the regime "thumbing its nose" at its critics, playing instead to strong nationalist sentiments. However, Syria has decided to maintain a minimum of cooperation with the United Nations so as not to isolate itself entirely from the international community.

Bashar is essentially re-creating the "old rules of the game" that governed Syrian politics under his father, Hafez al-Assad. He is striving to maneuver and manipulate various levers of power, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Indeed, he is more like his father than any of his siblings; he is very much a chess player, with a similar demeanor and outlook. He is becoming his own man, although the United States may not like his evolution.

Syrian Popular Response

Following the release of the second UN report on the Hariri assassination and the UNSC 1559 compliance report, the Syrian public is increasingly nervous about the prospect of sanctions. The regime has portrayed mounting external pressure as part of a broader U.S.-backed conspiracy against Syria, casting the choice for the Syrian public as stability (e.g. the regime) versus the chaos of Iraq. Syrian popular opinion appears to endorse this equation, with most Syrians opting to stick with Bashar, rather than throwing their lot in with external demands for change. From the standpoint of the Syrian street, many equate democracy with the chaos and sectarian fragmentation of Iraq, or the instability of Lebanon's confessional system.

If the Syrian public prefers Bashar over external pressure for democracy and regime change, this does not necessarily equate with support for the regime. Genuine popular support is only generated by two issues: anti-Americanism and anti-Lebanese sentiment. The regime has played both cards at home in order to undermine and isolate Khaddam, Bashar's principal rival.

Some Syrians believe that Bashar, now having consolidated his control on power, will allow for greater reform and political opening. By contrast, others are convinced that he will exploit the system he now dominates to maintain control. In this view, Bashar has simply replaced the "old guard" with his own allies across a number of institutions. As long as turmoil continues in Iraq and Lebanon remains, the U.S. will lose its gamble on pushing for democratic opening. Under this scenario, Bashar will "hang tough" and emerge the undisputed power in Syria.

Coming from a member of the regime's inner circle, Khaddam's accusations were a powerful indictment of the Syrian government. His widely broadcast interview, when taken in the context of his powerful connections both inside and outside Syria, clearly threw the regime off balance. Nonetheless, the Syrian public remains skeptical, viewing the former vice president as part of the same corrupt system he is now criticizing.

The Syrian Opposition

No longer calling for reform, the Syrian opposition is demanding comprehensive change. They face several challenges. Although the Syrian public favors change, they remain fearful of repeating either the Lebanese or Iraqi experiences. Some opposition figures accuse the regime of exploiting "the fundamentalist threat" to divert pressure for democratic change. They say that the regime has exaggerated the Islamists' popular support as part of its scare tactics.

For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood has stepped up its activities. They are hosting meetings that bring together a variety of opposition political actors. The Brotherhood was quick to embrace Khaddam, and called on the former vice president—and any other opposition elements—to join the campaign for change. They emphasize that Syria's future must be determined by Syrians through democratic elections and not through external intervention.

Opposition leaders seeking regime change do not see the "window of opportunity" closing any time soon. A committee of those who signed the October 2005 "Damascus Declaration" is forming and will act as a "united interim leadership" until a "general national congress" (of opposition forces) can be held. How the regime will respond to these challenges remains to be seen.

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