

WHAT DOES **SYRIA** WANT?



A PRESENTATION BY RAYMOND HINNEBUSCH
FOR THE CENTER FOR NAVAL ANALYSES
AND THE *FORUM DU FUTUR* (FRANCE)

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The distinguished American academic Raymond Hinnebusch, Director of the Centre for Syrian Studies and Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics at the University of St. Andrews (UK), recently spoke at a France/U.S. dialogue in Paris co-sponsored by CNA and the *Forum du Futur*. Dr. Hinnebusch agreed to update his very thoughtful and salient presentation, "What Does Syria Want?" so that we might make it available to a wider audience. The views expressed are his own and constitute an assessment of Syrian strategic thinking. Raymond Hinnebusch may be contacted via e-mail at: rh10@st-andrews.ac.uk



(Shown on the cover): A double portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (left) and his father (right), Hafez al-Assad, who was President of Syria from 1971-2000.

What Does Syria Want?

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With French President Nicholas Sarkozy's invitation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Paris in July, 2008, the question of whether Syria is "serious" about changing its ways and entitled to rehabilitation by the international community, has become a matter of some debate. The United States, for its part, recently chose to deepen its economic sanctions on the country. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has frequently said that Syria knows what it has to do in order to qualify for re-habilitation. But at the time of al-Assad's invitation to Paris, Damascus had not changed its essential policies or dramatically altered its relations with neighboring Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon. Rather, events in Lebanon in particular, but also Syrian participation in informal Turkish-hosted peace talks with Israel, had made it apparent, to the Europeans at least, that Syria could neither readily be isolated nor its influence curtailed in neighboring countries. Hence, a more productive policy would be to seek an adjustment of interests with Damascus.

The Durable Determinants of Syrian Foreign Policy

To evaluate Syrian actions at any given period, it is useful to understand the relatively durable determinants of Syria's foreign policy behavior. First, Syria is imbued with a powerful sense of grievance from the history of its formation as a state. The forced partition of historic Syria (*bilad al-sham*) by Western imperialism and the creation of Israel on the territory of geographic southern Syria profoundly frustrated Syrian aspirations. Arab nationalism, the dominant identity of

the country and ideology of the ruling Ba'th party, is a direct consequence of this experience.

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More than that, from its long disillusioning experience with the West, Syria has a profoundly jaundiced view of contemporary international order, recently much reinforced, which it sees as replete with double standards. Syrians observe that international law is selectively enforced, typically against Arab or Muslim states while Israel is routinely exempted from the standards expected of other states (notably, the prohibition of the acquisition, settlement, and ethnic cleansing of territory by force). In the eyes of Damascus, the Iraq war showed how the strong "take the law into their own hands," that war convinced the Syrian ruling elite that, after a brief period in the 1990s when a new world order seemed to be emerging, the world had regressed to a "lawless jungle," as then Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa put it. Syria sees itself as systematically treated unfairly—e.g., Syria's chemical deterrent force is targeted by the West while Israel's nuclear one is accepted. As Damascus sees it, it's a Machiavellian world: whether a state's interests are respected depends on having the power to defend those interests. A Syrian leader must play by the rules of such a world, combining enough of the coercive power of the "lion" with the guile of the "fox," as the Florentine writer advised. What this means is that great-power-engineered demands, advanced in the name of the "international community," enjoy no moral high ground or normative legitimacy in Syria. Equally important, however, for understanding what Syria does is its pervasive sense of insecurity. It is a small state surrounded by states which, at one time or another, have been seen as a threat. Historically its borders have been violated, recently by both Israel and

the United States. It faces a great military imbalance, with respect to Israel, and is now sandwiched between Israel in the west and the U.S. in the east. Less often recognized is that a constant preoccupation of the regime, owing to the over-development of the state relative to its economic base, is to secure the economic resources needed for regime survival. Because the regime cannot extract enough resources from the Syrian economy to fund the large military/security and welfare responsibilities it has assumed, it must always seek external resources of aid and revenue such as transit fees.

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Finally, the most immediate goal, around which all Syrian foreign policy behavior revolves, is the recovery of the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in the 1967 war. This is a matter of national honor and regime legitimacy. Syria is aware that this cannot be achieved without reaching an “honorable” peace settlement with Israel, one normally defined as accompanied by an acceptable resolution of the Palestine issue as well. Of the three factors governing Syrian foreign policy, the last, a positive goal, is the most powerful driver, while the sense of grievance and of insecurity condition how this goal is pursued.

Blocked Transformation in Syrian Foreign Policy

Syria’s policy could have been transformed and its position in world politics might have turned out quite different than it has. At the turn of the millennium such a change seemed possible, but it proved to be a missed opportunity. In the late 1990s, peace negotiations con-

ducted under U.S. auspices offered the prospect of a settlement with Israel. Also important was the succession of Bashar al-Assad, representative of a new generation with a vision of West-centric “modernization” of Syria’s economy: the center-piece of Bashar’s foreign policy was initially a strategic opening to Europe. Economic liberalization within was to be matched by Westward rapprochement without.

What deflected Syria from this new tangent, back to its traditional stance, was first the failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace process. Although Syria was publicly blamed for refusing the Israeli offer in Geneva in 2000, in fact, as American participants such as Martin Indyk and Robert Malley have admitted, it was Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak who backed away from following through on Israel’s prior promise of full withdrawal on the Golan. Still, the two sides were very close indeed and if there is the political will in Israel, the potential deal approached in 2000 could be revived. Had it been reached then, it would have transformed the Middle East and could it be reached now, it would much bolster the forces of moderation, although the chaos unleashed in Iraq since then cannot be undone, making it doubtful that the humpty-dumpty of regional stability can be put back together in quite the way that was possible in 2000.

At any rate, with a peace settlement off the agenda and, with it, the prospect that economic liberalization might provide economic resources for regime survival, Bashar’s regime opted to secure them through an 2001 opening to Iraq—earnings from the newly opened Iraqi oil pipeline across Syria and business opportunities in an Iraq under sanctions quickly filled the treasury and pleased regime-connected businessmen. This was, however, a decisive factor in starting Syria on a collision course with the United States. The U.S. determination to invade Iraq was, however, the immediate catalyst for a sharp deterioration in U.S.-Syria relations. It also

locked Syria into a foreign policy tangent at odds with the West and the U.S. in particular.

The Syrian Regime and the Iraq War

Understanding the regime's fateful decision to oppose the U.S. invasion of Iraq gives considerable insight into the regime's decision-making processes and priorities. There were many incentives for Syria to acquiesce in the invasion (as every other Arab state did) and many pundits compared Bashar's decision to oppose Washington unfavorably with his father's astute use of the 1990 Gulf war to put Syria on the "right" side of the U.S. What is more, the regime's stand against the invasion had no chance of actually deterring it. This stand gave the neo-cons in the Bush administration the opportunity to depict Syria as a foe of the U.S. in a unipolar world. Bandwagoning with the U.S. could have protected Syria's economic interests in Iraq and given Syria a share of the spoils or some side-payment—as it got in the first Iraq war of 1990-91. American goodwill was essential if the peace process was to be renewed. The main rewards Syria got in 1990 were control of Lebanon and an active U.S. role in the peace process—both of which it lost for opposing the U.S. in 2003. Bashar's economic reform program was contingent on integration into the world capitalist market, so he had a greater incentive to bandwagon with the U.S. than Hafiz had in 1990. Had the circumstances been similar, he probably would have done so.

But in 2003 they were entirely different and that is why Syria opposed the invasion. If in 1990 Hafiz had a U.S. commitment to a vigorous pursuit of the peace process, in 2003 the neo-cons made sure no such offer was on the table. If in 1991, Iraq was the aggressor against another Arab state, in this instance an Arab state was the victim of aggression by an imperialist power. Indeed, Syrian public opinion was so inflamed against the inva-

sion that regime legitimacy dictated opposition, a more important consideration for Bashar's unconsolidated rule than was the case for Hafiz in 1990. The U.S. doctrine of pre-emption, believed to serve Israeli interests, seemed to threaten the Syrian regime's very survival unless it virtually abandoned its Arab nationalist identity and role; hence, it was important that the U.S. not succeed in Iraq.

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Another important factor in shaping Syria's policy has been the style and content of American diplomacy. The U.S. approach has been to present Syria with a list of non-negotiable demands that threaten Syria's vital interests: to end support for Palestinian militants, dismantle Hizbollah, withdraw from Lebanon, and co-operate with the occupation of Iraq. In short, it has been required 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. Moreover, these demands were presented in a preemptory style that affronts Syrian pride. No Syrian government could accept such demands without major quid pro quos which have not been forthcoming.

Syria's Operational Code

A very durable Syrian behavior is, and has long been, the rejection of external demands and evasion of the dictates of great powers. What this means is that those who want something from Syria have to negotiate for it. But if this means Syria will not now bandwagon with

the U.S. hegemon, as all other Arab states have done, how does it deal with its very threatening environment? How can a small weak state such as Syria stand up to its much more powerful opponents?

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Syria’s former president, Hafiz al-Assad developed, out of his many years of experience dealing with stronger hostile powers, a *modus operandi* which continues to shape Syrian strategy and tactics. It includes the following:

- (1) Diversification of defensive alliances to avoid isolation;
- (2) Caution and a recognition that what is possible for Syria depends entirely on the balance of power. If it is unfavorable, Syria must be patient and wait until it shifts, while taking advantage of every opportunity to contribute to such a shift;
- (3) Never negotiate from weakness or without bargaining “cards”. Moreover, to bargain effectively requires use of asymmetric warfare to give the stronger opponent an incentive to negotiate an acceptable deal; and
- (4) Asymmetric warfare at reasonable risk is best pursued via proxies and also requires a military deterrent so that the enemy does not bring his full retaliatory superiority to bear on Syria. Needless to say such a *modus operandi* entails a delicate balancing act and the balancer is always liable to fall off the tightrope.

Syrian Strategy in Dealing with the U.S. after Iraq

This *modus operandi* is apparent in Syria’s strategy toward the U.S. in Iraq. The Syrian regime believed it could steer a middle way over Iraq between unrealistic defiance of U.S. power and surrender to it. Its calculations included the following notions. What obstructed U.S.-Syrian co-operation, in Bashar’s view, was Washington’s unbalanced ideological policy. A Syrian-U.S. accommodation was still possible if “rational” elements recovered power in Washington and, indeed, Syria pinned a lot of its hopes on just such a shift and believed that its own behavior could contribute to it.

Importantly, the regime also calculated that it had space to maneuver since the U.S. could or would not as readily resort to military force against Syria as it did against Iraq. This was because Syria was not subject to international sanctions, had little oil wealth to grab and to fund a U.S. occupation and had no opposition prepared to collaborate with it.

In the view of regime strategists, Syria also had “cards” to incentivize Washington, in that Damascus could either advance or obstruct American interests in the region, depending on whether a deal was reached in which each side respected the interests of the other. These “cards” included Syria’s status as a key to settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict; its unique ability to restrain or unleash Hizbollah’s proven ability to hurt Israel; its secular multi-communal model of governance and successful elimination of violent Islamic fundamentalism at home, and the prospect that destruction of the regime would spread chaos and radicalism beyond Iraq; and intelligence co-operation against terrorism which for a period Syria had offered Washington and which the latter acknowledged to have saved American lives.

At the same time, Syria made incremental concessions seeking to appease Washington. Borders with Iraq were tightened; Syrian forces were withdrawn from Lebanon. Believing that much of U.S. animosity to Syria was propelled by the neo-cons' Likud connection, Bashar tried to disarm them by proposing to restart the peace negotiations with Israel. However, U.S. policy was not to offer inducements to "rogue states." Syrian leaders became convinced that concessions only encouraged American hardliners to demand more. Given this, Syria's main protection from U.S. attack and its only leverage over Washington derived from America's difficulties in pacifying Iraq and the influence that Syria, together with its ally Iran, could exercise in Iraq for or against stabilization of the country. Syria had a certain interest in facilitating the insurgency there which, however, if pursued too far, was bound to dangerously exacerbate relations with the U.S.

Syria Policy toward Lebanon

Syria's role in Lebanon has been another issue fraught with contention between it and the West, as well as pro-Western states such as Saudi Arabia. Syria is seen to be deliberately obstructive and negative in Lebanon. But things look differently from Damascus.

Syria has permanent interests in Lebanon:

- (1) One relates to identity: Lebanon is seen as a detached part of Greater Syria, hence within Syria's natural sphere of influence and also a country that must be brought to acknowledge its Arab identity and not become a Western outpost like Israel.
- (2) Lebanon must not be allowed to become a base for forces threatening to Syrian regime security. This includes opposition forces that have sometimes made Lebanon a safe haven. It also includes keeping Israeli influence out of the country, and specifically reconstruction of the Israeli-Maronite alliance of the 1980s. The Israeli military threat

to use Lebanon's Bekaa valley to attack Syria's Western flank must also be deterred. (3) Lebanon has been a source of economic resources for regime patronage networks.

- (4) The Hizbollah-Syria alliance has become strategic for Damascus, with each supporting the other against common enemies. Hizbollah's ability to defy Israel is now a pivotal part of the Israeli-Syrian power balance and of Syria's deterrent against Israel. Also, Bashar developed close personal relations with, and is said to admire, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. The enormous Arab nationalist prestige Hizbollah has won also benefits its Syrian patron.
- (5) Lebanon would be one of Syria's strategic cards in any peace negotiations. Syria could both veto a separate Lebanese peace with Israel and deliver Lebanon into an acceptable one. It could also keep a hand on the "Palestinian card" through Lebanon or Hizbollah.

The Challenge to Syria in Lebanon

From the point of view of Damascus, the United States and France set out to deprive it of its cards and sphere of influence in Lebanon. The idea that Lebanon would be neutral and independent was not seen as credible: either Lebanon would be within Syria's sphere of influence or it would succumb to that of the U.S.-French-Saudi axis or even be penetrated again by Israel—their Lebanese clients would dominate instead of Syria's. Lebanon also now came to be seen as the main instrument through which the U.S. and France could threaten the Syrian regime. Their unprecedented use of international institutions against Syria has been very alarming for Damascus. UNSC Resolution 1559 calling on Syria to withdraw from the country and for Hizbollah to disarm was pushed by the U.S. and France despite the reluctance of other U.N. Security Council members

and despite the protest of the Lebanese government that this constituted interference in its sovereign affairs as it was a bilateral matter with no implications for international peace and security. The unprecedented setting up of an international tribunal to investigate the Hariri assassination is seen as a tool of regime change in Syria. Lebanon is also seen as a battleground in a wider struggle for dominance in the Middle East between the U.S. and its European and Middle East allies, and the forces of nationalist resistance, led at the state level by Iran and Syria, but including sub-state movements like Hizbollah and Hamas. It was thought axiomatic that the struggles in Iraq and Palestine would be affected by the outcome in Lebanon. How much Syria recognized that its troubles in Lebanon were partly of its own making is a moot point; the regime was stuck with the outcome. Although it understood there was no prospect of restoring its old role in Lebanon, Syria was determined to blunt the advance of its enemies there.

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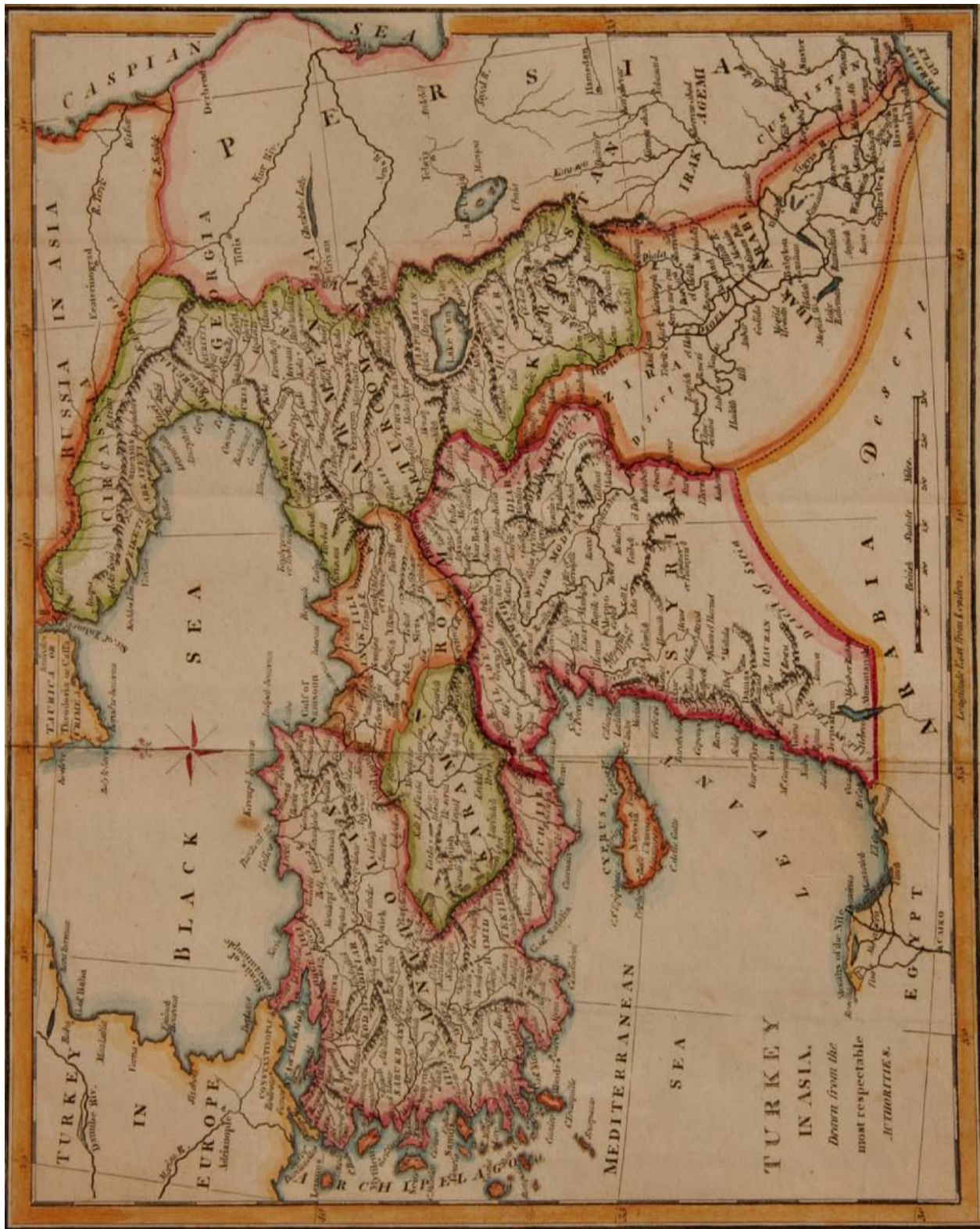
Syria’s strategy in the struggle for Lebanon included several prongs. The alliance with Iran was tightened. Keeping the Hizbollah card was seen as essential to retaining the Lebanon/Palestine cards and to making sure Lebanon would not become a platform for regime change in Syria. Hizbollah’s ability to stand up to Israel in the 2006 war showed its special value in any peace negotiations and as a deterrent. The key to protecting Hizbollah was to restore the consociational system in

Lebanon wherein no key decisions can be made without a consensus of the major sects—thus institutionalizing a veto for Hizbollah. This was against the attempt of the West and the March 14th coalition to use their temporary majority in parliament and government to push through policies inimical to Syria and Hizbollah.

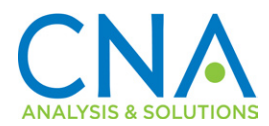
“Keeping the Hizbollah card was seen as essential.”

This strategy was not without considerable risks. It risked isolating Syria both globally and regionally from powerful actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, traditionally a friendly regional power, which was alienated by Syria’s role in Lebanon. It also risked setting back the realization of other objectives, such as restarting the peace process and integrating into the regional and world economies on which regime economic survival now depends. However, the strategy seemed to pay off when Hizbollah’s May 2008 power demonstration in taking over West Beirut precipitated a breaking of the Lebanese deadlock and formation of a national unity government headed by a neutral president and a coalition cabinet in which Hizbollah had a veto over policy. Lebanon would not now likely be a springboard for using the Hariri tribunal to engineer regime change in Syria.

However, while the balance of power seemed to shift toward Syria in Lebanon, with regional consequences, the regime would still like a deal with the West that recognized Syria’s vital interests in Lebanon and elsewhere. The West tends to assume that it has the legitimate right to lay down the law globally; Syria does not acknowledge this. So, unless Western powers want to take risks of regime change in Syria, they will have to meet the regime halfway. After the showdown in Lebanon, Syria seems to have a stronger hand in negotiating such an arrangement.



An 1810 British map showing Ottoman Syria with borders extending to the shores of the Mediterranean and south to Gaza.



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