

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

---

Is Damascus Ready for Peace?

Author(s): Daniel Pipes

Source: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Fall, 1991), pp. 36-52

Published by: Council on Foreign Relations

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20044912>

Accessed: 22-04-2017 14:22 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Council on Foreign Relations* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Foreign Affairs*

*Daniel Pipes*

## IS DAMASCUS READY FOR PEACE?

**A**fter thirty-five years of grim relations, Damascus and Washington are suddenly agreeing on a few things. Syrian and American troops stood together in the deserts of Arabia, facing down Saddam Hussein and calling themselves allies. Then the Syrian media toned down their habitually vicious anti-American rhetoric, and diplomatic contacts increased steadily. In July President Hafez al-Assad agreed, apparently without preconditions, to participate in an American-sponsored peace conference.

These changes, some of them quite abrupt, raise several questions: Do they signal a fundamental shift in Syrian politics or are they merely prudential? Has Assad undergone a change of heart regarding Israel or is he making tactical adjustments? Should the U.S. government build on this quasi alliance or distance itself from a brutal tyrant?

To answer, we begin with an analysis of Assad's character and an examination of recent developments that have affected Syria. Next we scrutinize Syria's key bilateral relationship—the one with Israel. Within this context, finally, we focus on American policy.

### II

Like any one-man dictatorship Syria is dominated by its ruler. President Assad unilaterally issues the country's laws and makes most of the life-and-death decisions affecting the twelve million Syrians he rules. Understanding Syrian politics, therefore, means beginning with Assad.

One way to understand Assad's character is to compare him with Saddam Hussein. They are about the same age (Saddam was born in 1937, Assad in 1930); they come from impoverished rural areas; they represent minority groups in their countries; and they have effectively ruled since about the same

---

Daniel Pipes is Director of Philadelphia's Foreign Policy Research Institute. This article is adapted from his forthcoming study for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Damascus Courts the West: Syrian Politics, 1989–91*.

year (1972 for Saddam, 1969 for Assad). In personality they share vaulting ambitions, a passion for secrecy and a Manichaean outlook that divides the world into agents and enemies. Both tend toward brinkmanship and are more interested in building their militaries than their countries. Each has imposed extreme centralization to create a stable order where turmoil had previously prevailed. Their political systems rely on Baath Party control, the pervasive use of informants and brutality. (Middle East Watch found torture in Iraq to be "used routinely"; Amnesty International described the Syrian jails as "almost a research center for torture.") Both have looked to Moscow for primary support but have occasionally wooed Washington. They have claimed to represent the Palestinians and sought to control weak neighbors. The two dictatorships are about as similar as any pair of governments on the planet.

Yet for all their similarities the two men differ profoundly. Whereas Saddam revels in brutality for its own sake, Assad resorts to it as an instrument of power. Saddam's dreams of glory distort his decision-making; Assad knows his limits and acts within them. Saddam's overt aggression makes him enemies; Assad's subtlety allows him to avoid trouble. Saddam displays an increasingly uncontrollable streak of impatience and has a terrible sense of timing (the invasion of Kuwait could not have occurred at a worse moment from the Iraqi point of view). Assad has a most refined sense of timing. He probes his opponents' weaknesses, waits for the right moment, chooses the most advantageous field of battle and strikes. (The seizure of Beirut in October 1990, 15 years after Syrian military involvement began, was a political masterpiece.) In this way, Assad has defeated one enemy after another: the Muslim Brethren, Lebanese militias, American troops in Beirut, Israelis in south Lebanon and Iraqi armed forces. In short, Assad is the virtuoso politician of the Middle East.

Understanding Assad's motives is not easy, for his words point only vaguely to what he thinks, and his actions only suggest what he intends.<sup>1</sup> As needs require, he shifts nimbly among policies. Throughout a decade, for example, he regularly condemned the Egyptian government for its 1979 peace

<sup>1</sup>Two biographies of Assad have recently appeared in English: Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad, The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography*, New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988, and Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

treaty with Israel. Then in 1989 he suddenly made up with Cairo.

Amid such shifts, however, three constants stand out: rule in Damascus by Assad and his people, the Alawites; pursuit of a Greater Syria; and the desire for strategic parity with Israel. The first is the most important. The Alawites, who constitute about 12 percent of the country's population, are sometimes portrayed as a sect of Islam, but Alawism is in fact a distinct religion. Accordingly an Alawite ruler in Damascus is repugnant to most Syrians, and this fact has shadowed Assad and the Alawites since their ascent to power in 1966. Muslim hostility in turn compels the regime to recruit heavily from its own community so that the government has a distinctly sectarian cast. Assad's overthrow would almost certainly lead to communal violence; merely to protect themselves the Alawites must stay in power. The result is a vicious cycle of hostility and repression.

Nevertheless the government does reach out to the majority Sunni Muslim population by avoiding contention in the domestic arena and stressing foreign policy issues. Foremost among these, at least since 1974, has been the dream of a Greater Syria—a notional territory that includes present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the occupied territories, Jordan and a portion of Turkey. Israel is the most prominent of Greater Syria's several regions, and for several reasons. Anti-Zionism permits Assad to atone for the Alawite community's (and indeed Assad's own grandfather's) past friendliness to Zionism.<sup>2</sup> It allows Assad to tap the Sunni Muslims' hostility toward the Jewish state, binding his regime to the disenfranchised majority. And it gives rhetorical form to a territorial claim: that the region west of the Jordan River should be subject to Damascus. Assad's ambition toward Palestine is both direct (he claims Palestine as southern Syria) and indirect (he stands up for Palestinian rights and tries to take over Palestinian organizations). Since 1978 Assad's goal of controlling Palestine has taken the form of strategic parity with Israel, which Assad defines broadly: "It does not mean that we should have a tank for each Israeli tank. . . . Strategic parity is composed of many

<sup>2</sup>For example, a June 1936 letter to the French prime minister signed by six Alawite notables, possibly including Assad's grandfather, expressed solidarity with the Zionists in Palestine: "Those good Jews brought civilization and peace to the Arab Muslims, and they disbursed gold and prosperity over Palestine without damage to anyone or taking anything by force." Abu Musa al-Hariri, *Al-Alawiyun*, Beirut, 1980, pp. 228–31.

elements. Before parity in weapons, it is parity in the cultural, economic and political fields.”

Ironically it is precisely in those fields that Syria has done most poorly in recent years. Assad has imposed on Syria a Soviet-style police state with all the repression and poverty that it entails. Middle East Watch has said of the Assad regime:

Having killed at least ten thousand of its citizens during the past two decades, it continues to kill through summary executions and violent treatment in prison. It tortures on a routine basis and arrests and holds thousands without charge or trial. It persecutes some of its minorities. It denies freedom of expression and association to its citizens and denies them their right to democratic participation in government.<sup>3</sup>

Economically Syria has been stalled for years in the grip of socialism, cronyism and huge military expenditures. Inept policies have produced an annual inflation rate of some 50 percent, a grossly overvalued Syrian lira and debts of some \$6 billion to the West and \$9 billion to the U.S.S.R. Although 30 percent of the work force is engaged in agriculture, grain has to be imported. Cities routinely experience electricity short-falls, and ordinary items such as toilet paper are unavailable for long stretches of time. Oil is the one bright spot. The country now produces about 480,000 barrels a day, of which some 220,000 barrels are exported.

Assad himself takes little interest in economic issues, with the exception of oil production. And until 1987 it seemed he did not need to, for things were going his way. Despite his country's small population, meager economy, social tensions and communal conflicts, he had turned Syria into a leading player in the Middle East.

### III

Then came Mikhail Gorbachev, perestroika, the collapse of communism in eastern Europe and the decline of Soviet bloc ambitions in the Middle East.

Changes to the north have directly affected Syria. Central Europe's new rulers are not only inclined to renounce their countries' former support for Assad but, in the phrase of then-Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens, they were “waiting in line” to renew relations with Israel.

<sup>3</sup>Middle East Watch, *Human Rights in Syria*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1990, p. 134.

## 40 FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Changes in the U.S.S.R. are even more worrisome. Moscow's interest in the region has plummeted as Soviet domestic problems have multiplied, and the Kremlin has more urgent uses for its resources than subsidizing Syria's armed forces. By one estimate, in late 1989 arms shipments to Syria had dropped by more than 50 percent during Gorbachev's tenure.<sup>4</sup>

These changes notwithstanding, the Soviet-Syrian relationship remains thick. Moscow continues to be engaged in the Middle East and Assad is its principal ally there. In 1988, well into Gorbachev's administration, Assad granted the Soviets a lease without term to construct a naval base at the port city of Tartus, making this the only Soviet base in the Mediterranean and possibly the largest permanent Soviet naval base outside the U.S.S.R. Moreover 2,500 Soviet military advisers continue to work in Syria and advanced Soviet matériel still arrives. Early in 1991 Assad reportedly struck a \$2 billion deal for Soviet arms. Given the many billions Damascus already owes Moscow, this is a noteworthy commitment.

Assad responded to the Soviet ebb tide by compromising long-standing positions that had hurt him in the West. In 1989, for example, government officials agreed to meet with Amnesty International. Mothers and wives of the "disappeared" were allowed to demonstrate. In March 1990 the government lifted the emergency law provisions instituted 28 years earlier. Syrians in exile received invitations to return, and mosque preachers found they could criticize the regime. In a characteristically despotic act of liberalization, the government called parliamentary elections on May 22, 1990, and permitted independents to increase their share of successful candidates from 18 percent to one-third. It was not democratic, but allowing opposition figures to address public gatherings did represent a concession.

The year prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait witnessed two dramatic changes in Syrian foreign policy. First was the announcement in December 1989 that full diplomatic ties with Egypt had been restored. After more than a decade of abusing Egyptian leaders for signing the Camp David accords this suggested a major realignment. In addition Assad softened the Syrian position vis-à-vis Israel. Early in 1990 he alerted former President Carter of his willingness to talk to the Israelis under

<sup>4</sup>*The New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1989.

certain conditions. Likewise, after meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in July 1990, Assad announced that, assuming other demands were fulfilled, "We are ready to join the peace process."<sup>5</sup>

Also to appease Western sentiments Assad released some Syrian Jewish women, reduced anti-Western propaganda, reestablished diplomatic relations with Great Britain, granted ready access to American diplomats and coordinated some policy with the U.S. government in Lebanon. He stopped terrorist attacks against Western targets in early 1989 and removed Muhammad al-Khuli, Syria's longtime terror mastermind, from his top position at military intelligence.

Thus even before the Iraqi invasion Assad was making changes here and there, adapting to his straitened circumstances, while leaving fundamentals as much intact as possible. Then Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.

#### IV

The gulf crisis proved enormously beneficial to Assad. To begin with it caused a rise in the price of oil that brought Syria a windfall of \$200 million. In addition funds came in from coalition partners: the European Community contributed \$200 million to Syria, and the Japanese sent a loan of \$500 million. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the other Gulf Cooperation Council states (Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman) pledged more than \$2 billion.

The crisis also enhanced Syria's international position. By joining a coalition with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Syrian isolation in Arab politics came to an end. With Saddam out, Syrian arms loom large in Arab politics; except for Egypt no other government can compete for influence.

Even more noteworthy was Assad's joining a U.S.-led coalition. Syrian troops contributed little to the fighting, but they served as a symbol—giving the coalition the sanction of a radical anti-American regime and making it harder for Saddam Hussein to disparage America's Arab partners as stooges. Syria's sanction was appreciated in Washington, and Assad was not shy about proclaiming his importance. "I am your cover," he told American officials, while requesting his quid pro quo: financial aid, Syria's removal from the list of states sponsoring

<sup>5</sup>*The New York Times*, July 17, 1990.

terrorism (which would offer a variety of benefits, including access to technology), political pressures on Israel and a guarantee that Israel would not use force against Syria.

In sum Assad's stand against Saddam Hussein won him an infusion of funds, new Arab friends and an enhanced regional stature. It also allowed him to switch from the anti-American to the pro-American camp in a single deft maneuver. He achieved this on his own terms with his dignity fully intact, with implicit forgiveness for past transgressions and without concessions. For Assad the Iraqi invasion was thus a providential event, easing several of his worst dilemmas and rescuing him from the cul-de-sac of Soviet clientship.

The gulf crisis also enabled Assad to reach a goal that he had been pursuing patiently for 15 years and that Syrians generally had been waiting to see for a lifetime: the domination of Lebanon.

Few Syrians have accepted Lebanon as an independent state since its creation in 1920. Only with the outbreak of Lebanon's civil war in 1975, however, did an opportunity to intervene militarily present itself. Since that war began Syria has increased its influence there each year. By the mid-1980s, 40,000 Syrian troops controlled about two-thirds of Lebanon. When the gulf crisis absorbed international attention and prevented Saddam Hussein from aiding his Lebanese protégé, General Michel Aoun, Assad moved swiftly. Fifteen years of effort culminated on October 13, 1990, when in three hours Assad's forces gained control of much of Beirut and the great majority of the country—all but Israel's "security zone" in the south and a few small patches here and there.

In May 1991 the Syrians initiated a rapid series of steps culminating in a treaty signed that month by the Syrian and Lebanese presidents. This agreement included an intent to work together in the political, military, economic, cultural and scientific realms; establishment of a supreme council made up of the president and three other officials from each country; and a formal request (with several conditions) for Syrian troops to remain on Lebanese soil.

To appease Lebanese sensitivities, words such as "unity" and "integration" were not used. The formulation became "one people in two separate states." Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara claimed that a majority of Lebanese and Syrians would welcome a union of their countries but added that his government was not seeking this "for the time being." The

assassination of Michel Salhab, a prominent Lebanese critic of the treaty, one day after its signing, however, suggested that Syrian control of Lebanon was already a reality.

This *de facto* hegemony in Lebanon permits Assad to exercise close control over events there, such as shutting down the free press through which his opponents used to attack him. He can better tap the revenues of Lebanon's drug trade, which brings in an estimated \$4 billion in profits each year. And he obtains a new potential military front against Israel. All of this strengthens Assad, but the last is of special importance, for Syria is the key to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

## v

A belief that Palestinians are the crux of the Arab-Israeli conflict has, on occasion, caused the Arab states almost to disappear from many Western eyes. Yet the Arab states are in most respects more fundamental to the conflict than the Palestinians. The states made war on the nascent Israel in 1948 and transformed a local communal conflict into an international issue. After losing they decided to keep the issue alive by denying Palestinian refugees the opportunity to settle down. Arab kings, emirs and presidents founded the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) at a summit meeting in 1964. Arab states, not Palestinians, engaged in the 1967 and 1973 wars. Through four decades Palestinians have been pawns of Baghdad, Amman, Damascus and the other state capitals—not the other way around.

Of these states confronting Israel, Egypt was long the most important due to its military power, size, active leadership and geographic centrality. But this role ended in 1979 with the signing of a peace treaty with Israel; the action then moved to Damascus, the second most powerful of Israel's neighbors. Since 1979 Assad has had such control over the Arab decision to make war or peace that militarily the Arab-Israeli conflict has been a Syrian-Israeli conflict. So long as Assad refuses to come to terms with Israel, the conflict continues. Were he willing to do so, the international dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict would rapidly shrink; the Palestinian issue would become a local problem, terrible for those immediately involved but of minor importance to the outside world.

With regard to secondary issues, the interests of Syria and Israel coincide in several minor ways. In Lebanon, for example, Syrians stay away from regions essential to Israeli security,

#### 44 FOREIGN AFFAIRS

while the Israelis forebear Syrian control of more distant areas (so long as the troops stay away and advanced weapon systems are not introduced). Clashes occur, but each party knows what the other will accept.<sup>6</sup>

Both governments despise Yasir Arafat and seek an alternate Palestinian leadership. Though there is little likelihood the two governments will agree on a replacement for Arafat, they work together to limit his area of maneuver. In April 1991 Syrian forces won Israeli permission to move farther into southern Lebanon to wrest these precincts from PLO control.

Finally a number of secondary issues could be settled through negotiation. The Israelis, for instance, are eager to work out the sharing of Litani River water. Arms control agreements—confidence-building measures, demilitarized zones or troop and arms reductions—offer another arena of potential cooperation.

The Golan Heights, won by Israel from Syria during the 1967 war, presents more of a problem. Israelis are deeply reluctant to part with the territory, while Syrians demand it as an absolute condition for diplomatic progress. Even here, however, some tacit accord exists.

Several factors explain Israel's position. To begin with, Syrian guns on the Golan Heights shelled the farms of northern Israel from 1948 to 1967. Israelis want to keep the Golan Heights to ensure that this does not recur. They also point to the vital buffer role the area played in 1973. "Without the Golan," an Israeli resident of that region recently explained, "we would have probably lost the whole of northern Israel."<sup>7</sup>

Then again, Israel pays little price for keeping the Golan Heights. The border is quiet, and Syrian nationals in the region are few (about 16,000) and untroublesome. They are nearly all Druze—members of a sect deriving from Islam but not recognized by mainstream Muslims—and so fit about as well in Israel as in Syria.

These factors tempt Israelis to see the Golan territory as their own. Polls show that over 90 percent of the Israeli electorate consistently favors retaining the Golan, and Israeli

<sup>6</sup>According to Yitzhak Rabin, the understanding includes five elements: Syrian forces stay away from the Lebanese-Israeli border; the Syrians keep their surface-to-air missiles out of Lebanon; Syrian combat planes also stay out of the region; the Israeli "security zone" in south Lebanon goes unchallenged; and the South Lebanon Army controls the Jezzín enclave. *The Jerusalem Post*, May 21, 1991.

<sup>7</sup>*Der Spiegel*, March 25, 1991.

leadership is firm. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir has often explained that Israel has no intention of giving up territory on the Golan Heights during future negotiations with Syria.<sup>8</sup> Yitzhak Rabin speaks for the majority of the Labor Party in saying: "Even in the context of peace with Syria, we should not go down from the Golan Heights."<sup>9</sup>

On the Syrian side, though Damascus occasionally calls for the Golan Heights to be returned, it never makes this the core issue with Israel, and with good reason. Israeli control of the Golan Heights serves Assad by deflecting discontent from him to an external enemy. As noted earlier Assad's weak domestic base means he depends on anti-Zionism to reach out to the majority Sunni population, and Israeli occupation of the Golan keeps him on the front line of confrontation with Israel.

But the same motive that allows Assad to accept Israeli retention of the Golan Heights works against his accepting the existence of Israel.

Since 1973 Assad's position on Israel has consisted of five no's, repeated thousands of times, privately and publicly:

- No talks before withdrawal.* Israel must return all the territories won in 1967 before Syria will negotiate.
- No partial solutions.* Confidence-building measures, ending the economic boycott, water arrangements and the like cannot precede an Israeli withdrawal; they can only follow it. (The 1974 Golan disengagement agreement is considered an exception.)
- No direct bilateral negotiations with Israel.* Negotiations with Israel are acceptable only in the framework of an international conference based on U.N. resolutions and at a meeting convened by the United Nations.
- No separate deal for the Golan Heights.* Israel must also withdraw from the other territories won in the 1967 war—the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza—and must allow self-determination for the Palestinians.
- No formal peace treaty.* Should the Israelis meet all his demands, Assad would sign only a nonbelligerency agreement. He offers Israel no war, not diplomatic relations or other normal ties.

Each of these demands is unacceptable to both the Likud and

<sup>8</sup>IDF radio, March 18, 1991. Shamir has also stated that U.N. Security Council resolution 242 "has nothing to do with the Golan" (Israeli Television, March 18, 1991).

<sup>9</sup>Radio Jerusalem, April 9, 1991.

Labor parties. To an unusual degree, Israelis concur that face-to-face negotiations must precede the evacuation of territory; that interim measures must precede the return of land; that they should not accept a U.N.-sponsored conference; that Jerusalem is an integral part of the Jewish state; and that any return of Arab lands must be rewarded by a full peace treaty. In other words Assad can offer these terms with complete confidence in their rejection by any government of Israel.

Until now such a rejection has suited Assad. Are there reasons to believe this has changed? The evidence is mixed.

On the positive side Syria may no longer have a viable war option, for Moscow no longer encourages Syrian bellicosity. Also Assad himself has improved relations with Egypt and the United States. Further, several of Damascus's traditional five no's have been modified:

- No talks before withdrawal.* This has changed. On July 14, 1991, the Syrian leader accepted President Bush's initiative as "an acceptable base," signaling a willingness to join in a U.S.-Soviet sponsored peace conference with Israel.
- No partial solutions.* Foreign Minister Shara told Secretary of State James A. Baker in March 1991 that ending the state of war or taking other steps before an Israeli withdrawal "is like putting the cart before the horse." Two months later he explicitly rejected the American two-track diplomacy (which links solution of the Palestinian problem with settlement of the Arab states' conflict with Israel), announcing that his government "does not accept a separate peace between Israel and Syria, and between Israel and the Palestinians."<sup>10</sup>
- No direct bilateral negotiations with Israel.* Assad has publicly agreed to "separate negotiations" with Israel on condition that they take place under the auspices of a U.N.-sponsored conference.
- No separate deal for the Golan.* In theory, the Palestinian issue is even more urgent than before, for Assad now demands a solution of the Palestinian problem before ending the state of belligerency. Whether or not he will stick to this position is unclear.
- No formal peace treaty.* Talk of peace is dismissed in Damascus as premature. At most the Syrians are willing to

<sup>10</sup>*Le Monde*, May 11, 1991.

offer Israel a nonbelligerency agreement in return for the Golan Heights alone (and drop the other territories); this allows Assad to win back the captured Syrian territory without accepting the permanent existence of a Jewish state. While flexibility on the first, third and last issues is counter-balanced by a seemingly hardened position on the fourth, Damascus's basic diplomatic position has overall been significantly changed.

On the negative side, though Syrian support of terrorism has diminished, it remains a concern. Terrorist incidents attributable to Damascus have gone down rapidly since 1986, especially those against Westerners, but they have not come to an end (the major example being Syrian involvement in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 in December 1988). Further, Syrian sponsorship of terrorist groups continues.

There is also reason to doubt whether Assad has actually given up on a war option. If he has, why does Damascus continue to devote 30 percent of gross domestic product and 55–60 percent of the government budget to military-related expenses? Why are Syrian fortifications along its Lebanese and Golan borders possibly the strongest in the world? Why were arms recently purchased from Moscow and Prague, including more and newer surface-to-air missile batteries? In the matter of surface-to-surface missiles, why did 60 to 80 Scud-C missile launchers arrive from North Korea in March 1991? Why, with 620 combat planes, did Assad purchase 48 MiG-29s and 24 Sukhoi-24s? Why, with 4,200 tanks, did he buy 300 more? And why yet another 2,300 artillery pieces? In addition why do two Syrian factories (near Damascus and Homs) produce several hundred metric tons of chemical gas year after year, and why is the gas weaponized on surface-to-surface missiles?

## VI

The possibility that Assad might make war to save his regime raises the alternative question of whether making peace is compatible with his retaining power. Is he a powerful dictator who can ignore public opinion and end the struggle against Israel if he wanted to? Or is his minority government too precarious to afford such a step?

When necessary Assad can and does defy his public. This happened in 1974 when he signed a disengagement agreement with Israel, in 1976 when he backed a Lebanese-Christian coalition against Muslims and Palestinians, and in

## 48 FOREIGN AFFAIRS

1980 when he supported Iran in its war with Iraq. Most recently it took place with the unpopular decision to join the anti-Iraq coalition.

Many in Syria fell under Saddam's spell and disagreed vehemently with their government's anti-Iraq policy. In the eastern towns of Syria pro-Saddam demonstrations erupted. Protestors chanted pro-Iraqi slogans, waved Iraqi flags and carried pictures of the man their media called "the butcher of Baghdad." In the south of Damascus some protestors even defaced posters of Assad—an act of extreme provocation and danger. In September 1990 Syrians and foreign diplomats estimated that 75 percent of the Syrian population backed Saddam; in December Syrian authorities put the number at 85 percent.<sup>11</sup>

In brief Saddam's popularity among Syrians roughly matched what it was among Jordanians. But King Hussein of Jordan felt compelled to appease this sentiment; Assad overrode it using force and propaganda. Some 50,000 troops violently repressed the protests of late August, killing dozens. Radio jammers blocked pro-Saddam television broadcasts from Jordan and CNN transmissions from Lebanon.

At the same time, the regime tried to appease public opinion. Baath Party officials gave talks around the country to justify the government's position. The Syrian media virtually ignored the 18,000 Syrian soldiers in Saudi Arabia, effectively operating under U.S. command.<sup>12</sup> Moreover Syrian troops stayed out of the actual fighting against Iraq. This achingly careful treatment of public opinion suggests a sense of vulnerability.

In sum Assad, like any smart ruler, pursues an unpopular policy only when he feels he must. Because domestic decisions are more critical to the regime's survival, he regularly imposes his will at home (for example, appointing Alawites to most sensitive positions). On foreign policy he seems more reluctant to challenge majority opinion. This explains the regime's Greater Syria orientation and its virulent anti-Zionism.

Assad could probably make peace with Israel if the right incentives were in place: for example, if coming to terms with

<sup>11</sup>*The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 27, 1990; *Time*, Dec. 3, 1991; *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 28, 1991.

<sup>12</sup>Conversely Saudi media heavily stressed the presence of Syrian troops as part of their pretense that 540,000 American soldiers did not exist.

Israel were the alternative to a major threat to his rule or a disastrous war, he would move in that direction. But this appears unlikely today.

Arab leaders have looked to Moscow for the means to make war on Israel, and to Washington for the means to make peace. Over time they have realized that getting territory from Israel is more likely through diplomacy than war.

But two models for Arab negotiation with Israel exist, the Sadat model and the Arafat model. Anwar al-Sadat was essentially sincere; he changed his policy, resolved problems with Israel and signed a peace treaty. Arafat was insincere, using negotiations to change Israeli public opinion, divide Washington from Jerusalem and enhance his position, while experiencing no change of heart about accepting Israel.

So far Assad more closely fits the Arafat model. Specifically he emulates Arafat in seeing negotiations as an alternate means of destroying the enemy. He shows no interest in settling with Israel; quite the contrary, the fundamentals of Syrian policy toward Israel remain in place, as do the main motives—living down the Alawite legacy of pro-Zionism, tapping Sunni anti-Zionism, fulfilling Baathist ideology.

A settlement, furthermore, would make Israel just another regional power and a participant in Middle East diplomacy. Were this the case Jerusalem would surely find more in common with Cairo and Amman than with Damascus, and would join their efforts to limit Syrian power. Israel's leverage in Lebanon might also increase. In other words Assad has good reason to work against Israel's integration into regional politics.

Nevertheless a major flare-up is unlikely. Assad will probably stick to peaceful means in his relations with Israel rather than spoil Damascus's precarious relations with the West or risk military humiliation. He is not likely to go further, for the Syrians would rather not pay the political price of resolution with Israel. At the same time, the Israelis would rather not take the military risk of giving up the Golan Heights. So while there is every reason for the U.S. government to pursue a peace process between Syria and Israel, this must be undertaken with modest expectations, patience and a sense of limits.

## VII

Two initial questions have been answered. The Kuwait crisis has not engendered a fundamental shift in Syrian politics; Damascus is simply making the best of a difficult situation.

Second, there has been no change of heart toward Israel, but some timely, tactical adjustments. Should then the U.S. government build on its new quasi alliance or distance itself from Assad's tyranny?

By way of an answer, three guidelines need to be observed:

- Expect few major changes in Damascus so long as Assad and the Alawites rule. The regime has a besieged quality and takes no unnecessary chances. Major changes are more likely when Sunnis regain power.
- The economy is Assad's weak spot. With the Soviet bloc no longer supplying funds as before, and with most oil-rich Middle East states cooperating with the United States, Washington can exert much greater influence over the outside income that pays for the military strength undergirding Assad's aggressive foreign policy.
- Syria is central to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Accordingly, going into a full-scale peace process without Syria is unrealistic. The other parties cannot make the key decisions of war and peace; they are intimidated by Damascus and would not be able to sustain their accords with Israel.

Within these guidelines, the principal danger today is that Washington is about to repeat with Assad the mistakes it made with Saddam—overly friendly relations lasting too long. Two considerations suggest this. First, the Middle East hosts many governments, courted and armed by an outside power, that later turn against that patron. Sadat did this to the Soviets, Khomeini to the Americans, Saddam Hussein to both. Given a chance, Assad may also turn on Washington.

Second, on the American side a tendency exists to imbue tactical alliances with a friendship that is not reciprocated. Americans expected Stalin to cooperate after 1945: Eastern Europe was the casualty. U.S. ties to Saddam Hussein should have shut down in 1988, along with the Iraq-Iran War, but foolishly continued for another two years. The same mistake may be repeated with Syria. It was appropriate in November 1990 for George Bush to bind Syria to the U.S.-led alliance by telling Assad what he wanted to hear. With the war over, the time has come for a more demanding U.S. position.

To begin with, American officials should remind Assad (and themselves) that lasting ties between states depend on common values. Early on Secretary Baker said, after meetings in Syria, "We can have close relations only with countries that share our

fundamental values.” Specifically, Washington should demand across-the-board changes as the price for its continued and future cooperation.

Damascus has signaled its willingness to enter into an Arab-Israel peace process, albeit in a highly circumscribed and inscrutable way. This is a good start toward better relations, but not enough. In addition Assad must now show flexibility and seriousness of purpose in those negotiations. He also needs to take steps that would alter the very nature of his regime. These would include: make major improvements in human rights; repay the over \$1 billion owed to the West currently in arrears (a burden much facilitated by oil export revenues); end the military buildup and instead devote more resources to raising the Syrian standard of living; arrest and prosecute terrorists, expel the dozens of terrorist groups operating out of Syria or Syrian-held territory, and end direct Syrian involvement in terrorism; phase out Syrian troops from Lebanon; and end Syrian involvement in and sponsorship of the Lebanese drug trade.

A variety of symbolic and good faith gestures would also go far to improve the atmosphere: compensate the American victims of Syrian-sponsored terrorist attacks; allow Western scholars and journalists to enter Syria, do not unduly restrict their access, and do not censor their reports; help win the release of all American hostages in Lebanon; release the approximately 4,000 remaining Jews from captivity in Syria; and arrange for extradition to the West of such figures as Alois Brunner (the highest-ranking Nazi still at large and a man deemed by Simon Wiesenthal “the worst ever” of the Third Reich criminals) and Ahmad Jabril, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command.

Some of these demands may be unrealistic in the short term. Still they are worth asserting, for they mark enduring American positions. As we have seen elsewhere in the world, American stands that seem hopelessly idealistic for decades on end can suddenly become cutting-edge policies.

It is realistic to expect the implementation of these steps because none of them harms Syrian national interests. More to the point, with the exception of human rights improvements, neither do they infringe on the Assad regime’s ability to retain power. Assad should be made to understand that rejection of these changes implies lack of serious interest in improving

relations with the United States; to the extent he accepts them, Washington should respond positively.

What can Washington do to press these points? The most promising approach is through Damascus's pocketbook. Damascus remains a beneficiary of the Generalized System of Preferences, a program that allows poor countries to export manufactured goods to the United States with reduced duties, though it may fail the provisions concerning workers' rights and terrorism. The Syrians are not required to reciprocate for commercial benefits they already enjoy, particularly access to American oil expertise to manage their tricky oil fields. The Syrians seek money on the American financial markets and in American commercial investment in Syria and trade. These can be denied. In addition credits can be withheld, most-favored-nation status denied and government-backed insurance refused.

Ideally American friends, both Western and Arab, will take similar steps; should they not do so, Washington should exert pressure on them. At the very minimum they can be induced not to subsidize the Syrian economy.

Should American leaders decide to make the taming of Syria a higher priority, they can adopt other steps, including a reduction in Syrian diplomatic missions, the imposition of travel restrictions on Syrian nationals and pressure on nearby states to take a tougher stand vis-à-vis Syria. Most ambitiously, Assad's Syrian enemies could be helped to unseat him, with an eye to bringing Sunnis to power in Damascus.

This is not the moment to decide among such options, but Americans should keep in mind the dangers posed by Damascus. Assad is a formidable opponent; influencing Syrian policy requires a steady hand and a willingness to endure setbacks. Above all, U.S.-Syrian bilateral ties are profoundly unequal. Assad now needs U.S. favor more than the reverse. Yet he will try to induce Washington to pay him for allowing himself to be helped; this must not happen. U.S.-Syrian relations can prosper only if American officials adhere to positions that are morally grounded and politically sound.

Similarly if America pressures Israel for concessions, the leadership in Damascus has no incentive to give up anything of importance, much less come to terms with Israel.