What About Syria?

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Martha Kessler, CIA analyst

I would like to begin by saying a few words about negotiations, which – in my view – provide the context for President Asad's foreign policy and domestic considerations. Some would say I have this backward, and therein lies the essential debate among Syria watchers about Asad and Syria. Is a peace settlement with Israel the primary objective shaping his foreign and domestic posture, or is pursuit of negotiations a means to other internal and external goals? I believe a peace agreement is Asad's driving purpose. Issues of leadership, succession, domestic politics, relations with the United States, and a host of other vital problems are managed by Asad through the optic of ending the Syrian-Israeli conflict, not the reverse.

With a birth date of 1930, Asad is not old by today's standards, and he may be leading Syria for years to come. But he has debilitating illnesses, making succession a near obsession among Syrians and engendering a sense that an era is coming to an end. Among the imponderables this creates is whether Asad will soften his approach to negotiations in the interest of his son, a waning Clinton administration, and a new, more receptive Israeli government. In my view, Asad's circumstances may be a stimulant for greater speed and directness in the peace process, but not a force for greater flexibility and concessions. Asad has been strikingly consistent over the past 30 years of his rule on several key positions that will not change even under the ultimate time pressure he now faces.

First and foremost, Asad has focused on protecting Syria's vulnerabilities and preserving its independence in a region crowded with more powerful players: Israel, Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Iraq. His caution, eclectic tactics and shifting alliances are the moves of a defensive player, not an ideology with grand leadership ambitions. He has never overplayed or overestimated Syria's capabilities or importance. He is unlikely to conclude an agreement that increases Syrian vulnerability just because of he wants to "reverse the disaster of 1967."

The return to Syria of the entire Golan Heights, with only a few and minor adjust-

ments in the June 1967 border, is Asad's price for peace; virtually all Syrians are united in this. Acceptance of anything less would be destabilizing to the leadership, if not the country. Asad has committed his adult life to this goal, and is unlikely to abandon it, even as he approaches death.

Sequence, format and all procedural issues are, for Asad, laden with potential leverage or disadvantage, and he is unlikely to be substantially more flexible on them than he has been in the past. Israel has been the unequivocal victor over Arabs in the realm of negotiation tactics, and Asad is acutely aware of this. He believes Oslo and Wye were major negotiating blunders that hurt Palestinian chances for peace. He will try to avoid their mistakes. His insistence that negotiations resume where they ended in 1996 is not surprising from this perspective.

The structure of peace must ensure some measure of safety for Syria in the security arrangements themselves and in the power balance that this structure ushers in. Despite characterizations of Syria as a military threat to Israel, Israel has overwhelming military advantage over Syria. Thus, there are limits to the principle of asymmetry that Asad already agreed to in earlier negotiations, by which Syria would accept a deeper pullback and thinner deployment of forces than Israel in any security regime. A robust U.S. role in monitoring peace will be critical to Syrians as well.

External Factors

External considerations are of paramount concern to Asad's conduct of peace negotiations because he believes other regional players are the key to checking Israel's impulse toward regional domination. In order of importance to Syria, these other actors are the United States, Lebanon, the Palestinians, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey/Jordan.

One of the great ironies in the Madrid process is that after nearly three decades of Asad's trying to get the Arabs to adhere to a united negotiating strategy, he failed completely and faced Israel across the table quite alone with only the added weight of Lebanon to bolster a fairly weak bargaining hand. Israel – the tactical victor – rather than seeing its success in winnowing the Arabs down one by one, approached Syria as if it were facing all the Arabs and tried in the last round of negotiations to extract extensive, over-reaching security requirements. Uri Savir speaks to this counterproductive "worst case" thinking on the part of Israel in his book, *The Process.*

Having lost the strategic weight of Egypt in the 1970s, then the patronage of the Soviet Union, and finally, one by one, the Palestinians and Jordan, Asad has reshaped Syria's negotiating strategy and its security posture around the United States. He sees Washington as the most effective guarantor of honesty in the negotiations, of the peace, and of managing Israel's expansionist tendencies and its unstable – in Syria's estimation – political scene after a settlement. This has required improving working relations with Washington and some effort to satisfy U.S. concerns on terrorism, drugs and proliferation. Asad is far too realistic to try to compete with Israel's special ties to the United States or to expect the kind of largesse Washington has provided the strategically important relationship with Egypt. The goal here seems to be to nudge the United States toward becoming deeply invested in a more balanced peaceable regional order rather than just the

generous backer of Israel as a regional superpower, as in the Reagan years. Should Israel successfully push Washington to reduce its role in negotiations or Washington constrict its posture in a new administration, Syria might even pull back from the process.

Lebanon's greatest importance to Syria is as a point of pressure on Israel and as a buffer from Israel. Asad has played out a long, costly, dangerous drama in Lebanon for these and several other reasons: to manage the destabilizing ethnic and religious tensions in Lebanon that spilled into Syria in the late 1970s; to exert some control over the large, restless Palestinian community there; to preempt and channel Iran's ties and interests to the Shia of South Lebanon; and to exact a price from Israel for holding onto the Golan through "proxy wars of attrition." Prime Minister Barak's election promise to get out of Lebanon is an indication of Syrian success. Even if Asad were entirely successful in peace efforts, Lebanon is still important for Syrian protection, and Asad will not abdicate Syrian influence there as part of a settlement with Israel.

The Palestinians and Syria are now engaged in a complicated, competitive choreography in this final stage of peace negotiations. After decades of being the major champion of the Palestinian cause, Syria ironically faces a situation in which now only the Palestinians and Syria remain on the Arab side, and many believe one will fare better at the other's expense. Israeli leaders claim they cannot for domestic political reasons move both tracks significantly forward simultaneously and have used this seeming problem to foster competition between their two remaining erstwhile enemies. The Syrians believe they were used by Rabin in the last round to get Palestinian concessions; therefore, they are extremely wary of being used once again. The very close association of Syria historically with the Palestinians' disappointments, will reverberate inside Syria under any circumstances, since there are roughly 400,000 Palestinians living in Syria and an even larger community in Lebanon. Thus, controversies over Jerusalem, the right of return, and other explosive issues on the Palestinian track could ultimately hurt Syrian stability.

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Egypt and Iran are central in Syria's calculations because at bottom they anchor Syria's security, depending on the outcome of negotiations and the future of Syrian-U.S. relations. Egypt is the strategic weight Asad believes the Arab side needs to live in a safe, equitable peace with Israel; moreover, Cairo, along with Saudi Arabia, is the draw to Washington's interest in keeping some semblance of balance between its special ties to Israel and its interests in the Arab world. Iran is the alternative if all does not go well. Syria's close and enduring ties to Iran give Damascus an alliance with the one country in the region that gives Israel and the United States some serious pause because of its anti-

Israeli and anti-U.S. impulses, its WMD programs and sponsorship of terrorism. Depending on its own needs, Syria can use its special voice in Tehran as either hindrance or help to U.S.-Israeli interests.

Finally, Turkey and Jordan are important side players to Syria, in that Israel has tried to court both in what Asad fears is a move toward regional hegemony. Syrian leaders have expended considerable diplomatic energy to thwart Israel's efforts and have had some success with the Turks and the Jordanians. Following a low point last year over the Ocalan affair, Syria and Turkey now have friendlier ties than at any time in the last two decades. While not particularly useful in negotiations, improved relations with Turkey put some limits on Israel's ability to press Damascus regionally. Jordan under the new king has become a true advocate of Syria's interests in the peace process and has used his good offices in Israel and the United States to push restarting the Syrian-Israeli peace track.

Internal Factors

Succession

Much has been made of the impact on negotiations of Asad's failing health and his desire for his son, Bashar, to succeed him. However, even though Asad is facing the ultimate time pressure, he is unlikely to significantly deviate on fundamental peace positions. One possible exception is the uncertainty of decision making by a man debilitated or incapacitated by illness. In my view, Asad has groomed his son and kept him close not just in hopes of his succession to the presidency, but to have him act as a surrogate during the period of decline Asad has long known he would have to endure.

Analysis of succession tends to overemphasize centrifugal forces: the Sunni-Alawi split, generational tensions and Asad family problems, particularly the continuing ambitions to leadership of Hafiz's brother Rifaat. These issues are important still, but they are yesterday's agenda to some extent. Years of Asad's dominating the scene have made it difficult to see the ambitious men and alliances of individuals that could come into play at his passing.

It is important to consider the more subtle but surprisingly strong centripetal forces. First, there is the desire for continued stability. The disintegration of Lebanon is as vivid to this generation as pre-Asad Syria is for older Syrians. Peace efforts, moreover, reinforce the desire for stability because national vulnerability appears so dangerous at this unresolved stage of dealing with a long-time and more powerful enemy.

Hafiz Asad is not loved, but he is understood and admired deeply by some, grudgingly by others. His son would inherit some of his father's legitimacy and mystique. Moreover, Asad is viewed as utterly devoted to Syria's regional safety and stature, and all will look for this quality in a successor. The power of name and relationships is great in traditional Syrian society, even if the son is regarded as unprepared.

Process, law and the constitutional system are very important, though not because of any inherent love and respect for the law. Since legitimacy is problematic in a secular, heterogeneous but predominately Muslim state, the constitutional pathway to leadership change is important. The Baath party and the government structure may seem weak and

rickety in Asad's shadow, but they are the home of important elites. And the top level of both the party and the bureaucracy is where the military exerts its influence. In the uncertainty of Asad's absence, these institutions are stabilizers and forces for cohesion. The way Asad has groomed Bashar is indicative of the importance he places on these structures.

The delicate and incomplete status of the peace process itself is a centripetal force in Syrian politics and a force for the smooth transition of power. Most Syrians are like Asad, very focused on the nation's vulnerability to Israel and regional forces determined by more powerful players than Syria – Israel, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Iraq and the United States. Most Syrians understand that Asad has played a relatively weak hand extremely well. He has carved out substantial independence and regional clout for Damascus and developed with little or no help from other Arabs a good shot at regaining the Golan by peaceable rather than forcible, costly means. They are likely to value a smooth transition now more than at any other time.

Popular and Elite Attitudes

In the conduct of the next phase of the peace process, Asad or any successor will take into account popular attitudes toward peace in navigating through the process and crafting acceptable terms. During the negotiations from 1992 to 1996, the Israelis operated on the mistaken assumption – most clearly articulated in the Rabinovich book – that Asad lagged behind the Syrian public's desire for peace and was the major impediment to progress. This faulty assessment led to unrealistic expectations about how quickly and definitively Asad could move at critical junctures in negotiations. In my view, Asad has been able to lead Syria for 30 years because he is attuned to popular attitudes on overarching issues and most especially attitudes toward Israel and peace. In that sense, he leads from the front and center.

During the entire period of negotiations there was no sign of popular unhappiness with the regime's cautious and exacting approach. What grumbling occurred was against any concessions to Israel, including peace. There was no sign of the regime's suppressing pro-peace sentiment. On the contrary, it was more worried about convincing people of the merits of peace and preparing them for it.

Helena Cobban, journalist and author of a forthcoming book on Syria

My study covers particularly the bilateral talks that took place between the governments of Israel and Syria between 1991 and 1996, in the aftermath of the Madrid Peace Conference. The bilateral talks opened very rapidly after Madrid, but they didn't get very far at all under the Likud government of Yitzak Shamir. The interesting portion took place after Yitzak Rabin was elected in 1992, and up to March 4, 1996, when Shimon Peres, who was then prime minister, suspended Israel's participation in the talks on that track – in an atmosphere where there had been Palestinian bombings in Israel, and there was an election campaign heatedly underway. Peres suspended the participation of the negotiators in those talks. This was in the fairly widely understood expectation that after he had succeeded, as he confidently expected to do in the elections of May of that year, the talks

on that track would be resumed very rapidly. That understanding was shared with all the parties. Of course, as we know, he was not reelected. We then had a three-year hiatus, which gave many of us the opportunity to write about a discrete set of negotiations that had taken place between '91 and '96, without being bothered by news of breaking events under Likud. By and large, there were none of any import, on this track at least.

The question is, where did they end? The record has been rather broadly publicized by Uri Savir, the chief negotiator under Peres from December 1995 through March 1996, in his excellent book *The Process*. [I have noted in one of my writings that Bill Quandt wrote a book called *The Peace Process* and that Uri Savir has now taken the "peace" out of the "process," but that's a small criticism.] I have a tremendous amount of respect for Uri Savir and for his concept of what it takes to make peace with former enemies, with people whom one is hoping will become former enemies. His concept of reciprocity in peacemaking is one that I think is not broadly shared amongst the Israeli peacemakers. Of course, when he writes of what happened on the Syrian track, it is a little coda – a chapter and a half at the end of a book dominated by his account of what took place on the Palestinian track, where he spent considerably longer. But those were some remarkable negotiations that took place with the Syrians under Peres and with Savir as the head negotiator. These were the original Wye talks. They have been almost forgotten in the public discourse in this country, where 'Wye' has come to be associated with the Palestinians. What happened on the Syrian track at Wye was basically that Peres became prime minister under ghastly, tragic circumstances and learned, to his amazement, how much Rabin had achieved on the Syrian track, and decided within days of Rabin's death to place his emphasis there. Perhaps this was a rash decision to make within days of a traumatic event, but you have to say it was bold. Peres came and said to the Syrians, "We can go towards peace flying low and slow, or we can go towards peace flying high and fast, and I would like to go high and fast – will you join me?" This was conveyed through Warren Christopher and through President Clinton in phone conversations. Bill Clinton's phone relationship with President Asad has been an important factor.

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Peres invited Asad to join these "high-flying" negotiations, and Asad said yes. Now, to me, that is the crucial piece of evidence everybody had been waiting for. So many of our Israeli friends, people like Ze'ev Schiff, had been asking since Madrid, "Is Asad serious about making peace? Is peace a strategic decision for Asad or just a tactical maneuver?" And to me, when Peres came in with this invitation and Asad said yes, that is the decisive piece of evidence. What ensued were the "Wye talks," two-and-a-half "sessions" at the Wye Plantation in Maryland, and then the parties went back home. (The Syrians have very poor communications, so somebody had to actually get on a plane and go back to

report to Asad and get marching orders for the following week.) And then they'd come back to the next half of that same session.

At that point, they were talking about everything on the agenda. Until then, Rabin had them talking sequentially through an agenda that started with the territorial provisions, went through the security arrangements, got mired in the security arrangements, and then would have moved to the political and economic links and the question of interface, that is, the modalities of implementation. But Peres was trying to do this all at once in a kind of multilateral, multi-basket, multi-issue, multi-phased sort of negotiation where people were talking about water in this corner, about economic links in that corner, and about other things elsewhere. In most of those corners, there was an American present, except in the legal discussions, where the State Department "could not find" anybody. The Syrians and the Israelis got together there and talked about legal matters by themselves.

Savir said that they achieved 60 percent of what they wanted to achieve. Ambassador Moualem, the chief Syrian negotiator, has told me that he thinks it was something like 75 percent. Dennis Ross walked out after the first of those sessions at the Wye Plantation and said they had achieved more there than they had in the previous five years of discussion! They really were going very fast at that point, because there was a commitment on behalf of both sides to complete the negotiation. Once you have that kind of a commitment, you can make peace treaties in less than seven years or whatever it has taken the Palestinians. They had already thought out, at that stage, the territorial underpinnings of this agreement through the hypothetical communications that Rabin had sent to Asad in August of 1993 and July of 1994. By July of 1994, the hypothetical they were working on was an Israeli withdrawal to the line of June in 1967. That is, the status quo ante the Six-day War.

The difference between the international border and the June 4, 1967, border is that the June 4, 1967, border, in one particular respect is to the west of the international border. Actually, the June 4, 1967, is not a border, it's a demarcation line in the middle of the DMZ that they had obtained after 1949. And a crucial bit of territory there is Hamet Gader, in a little nook of the Yarmouk River. The Israelis have a sort of fish-farm cum Disneyland there right now. For some reason, though, having to do with access to the Sea of Galilee, the Syrians are very concerned to get this bit of land in addition to the international border. That was the one hypothetical on the basis of which they were talking at that time.

It is not that there were numerous hypotheticals – if we do X, what will you do? If we do Y, what will you do? Itamar Rabinovich portrays it in his book *The Brink of Peace* [Princeton, 1998] this way: "Well, it was only a hypothetical offer." But there were not lots of hypotheticals out there. This idea of a full Israeli withdrawal was the one basis on which they were negotiating. So, when the Syrians say, "We want to return to the negotiations where they left off," that is what they want to return to. It also includes, from their part, all of what they view as concessions that they made at Wye on issues like water, economic links, normalization – and security arrangements that would be asymmetrical, as opposed to their long-standing rhetorical insistence on symmetrical and balanced security arrangements.

So there are hypothetical concessions from both sides in these suspended negotiations,

and that's where the Syrians want to return. That is where, until now, Barak has not been willing to return. That's what the conversations are about that are taking place during Prime Minister Barak's current talks here in Washington, or in New York City, as we speak.

There is a lot at stake in making peace between Syria and Israel. We're assuming that with the success of this negotiation you would also get a peace between Lebanon and Israel, and you would therefore put Israel in a situation where it would no longer be in a state of war with any Arab state on its borders. This existential situation that they have been in since 1948, of being at war with Arab state neighbors, would be ended. Of course, that still leaves a major issue having to do with the Palestinians, which is, in a sense, a human-rights challenge, and a challenge at the level of identity – a huge challenge for the Israelis to deal with – but it's not a military challenge.

One of the major lessons the Syrians have learned is to seize the time. You can argue about who wasted more time when Rabin was prime minister in Israel, and it's clear that Rabin did engage in a lot of time-wasting on the Syrian front, as on the Palestinian front, but Asad also engaged in time-wasting. From all accounts, when Rabin was killed, it was deeply shocking for Asad. He had not realized until then what the stakes were for an Israeli prime minister committed to making peace. He had until then thought that when Rabin was saying, "I can't do this because of my public; I can't do that because of my public," it was a sort of political maneuvering. And then suddenly it was revealed, in a most graphic way how high the stakes had been for Rabin. That, in a sense, largely explains his positive response to Peres's invitation.

There's another aspect to this time-wasting problem, which was that the Syrians know now much more than they ever knew before how extremely porous the Israeli political system is. We know that at an important point in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations in late June of '95, when the chiefs-of-staff of the two countries were having their second meeting on the basis of a paper that was called a "non-paper paper,"everybody was holding the text of this 'non-paper paper' very closely until Bibi Netanyahu, who was the leader of the opposition, revealed it in the Knesset. It was disastrous to the prospects of those negotiations at that point.

So the more you waste time, the more untoward things are likely to happen, whether leaks, or assassinations. That's the main lesson.

Hisham Melhem, Washington, D.C.-based journalist and commentator

My assignment is the very simple one of the domestic scene in Syria. If you take the complex issue of resuming the negotiations between Israel and Syria, add to it the recent reshuffling of senior military officers and the recalling of senior diplomats, including the Syrian ambassador here in Washington, add to it the continuing rise of Bashar Asad (part of what I would call the phenomenon of the son also rises in the Middle East) and add the recent measures against the supporters of Rifaat Asad – the president's discredited brother – including arrests, the closing down of an illegal port, and unconfirmed clashes . Finally, add to this strange brew reports of President Asad's deteriorating health, and you will have the making of what appears to be a very perplexing situation in Syria.

In the minds of many Syrians, Arabs, Israelis and Americans it is practically impossible today to discuss Syria's views on the peace process in isolation from the issue of succession. In the peace process there is no room for flexibility in the stated Syrian position on negotiations with Israel: the resumption of talks from where they left off in 1996, and the return to the line of June 4, 1967. This mantra has been repeated for years now by Syrian officials privately and publicly.

If you believe in the conventional wisdom that President Asad is grooming his son to succeed him, (I have a slightly different take on this issue), it's only natural then that he would like to reach an unassailable agreement with Israel, the so-called "peace of the brave" (a phrase he introduced to the lexicon of Middle East peace making only to see it appropriated by Arafat and Barak) to insure that no one will use the agreement to undermine Bashar's prospects. He is not going to accept anything less than what the Egyptians accepted at Camp David. After all, this was the man who led the charge against Camp David for almost a decade. Asad is the only Arab leader who negotiates with Israel not solely on a bilateral basis but as a regional player. He brings to the chessboard his considerable assets in Lebanon, his leverage with some Palestinian groups, an enduringly solid relationship with Iran, and a close relationship with Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent with Egypt. He has been tenacious in his defense of Syria's interests, not only to get back all of the Golan, but also to preserve for Syria a regional role in the post-peace Middle East that would make it possible for the Syrians not to live constantly in the shadow of Israeli power, something every Syrian feels and resents.

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There are two issues on which Asad can afford to pay a heavy price in terms of blood, sweat and resources: standing up to Israel's hegemony and maintaining Syria's influence in Lebanon. On these two issues, Asad articulates the closest thing we have to a consensus in Syria. There is no consensus on Iraq. There's no consensus on dealing with Jordan. There's not even a consensus on how to deal with the Palestinians. But on Lebanon and on Israel, a broad consensus exists. That is why Asad has been able to take risks on these two issues over the years.

Clearly, Asad would like nothing more than to achieve the kind of peace that we're talking about. He would like to free his successor or successors from the burden of peace making with Israel to enable the new regime to focus on the domestic agenda. If you talk to senior Syrian officials privately, they will concede that they will be exposed to overwhelming Israeli influence in the post-peace era, given that none of Syria's institutions can be a match for any in Israel. They are aware of this kind of vulnerability, and that's one of the reasons they will resist the kind of full peace that the Israelis are asking

for: the flag in Damascus, the tourists and exchange programs, the traffic in goods and ideas, the 'warm' peace that Israel doesn't even have with Egypt.

Asad essentially is dangling in front of the Israelis the notion that peace with Syria will lead ipso facto to peace with Lebanon. This would put an end to the conventional Arab-Israeli conflict as we've known it for decades, the state-to-state conflict, reducing it to its bare essentials: the struggle between Palestinians and Israelis over the historic land of Palestine. Such a peace among the states of the Levant would enhance normalization between Israel and the other Arab states. It would reduce considerably Iran's influence in Syria and Lebanon. By extension, it would also decrease the ability of the Islamist movements in the Mashreq to challenge the new peace structure.

Now let me say a few words about the recent changes in the military hierarchy in Syria. A number of powerful military officers were removed, retired or kicked upstairs in recent years. Of the once-famous four Alis – Ali Duba, head of military intelligence; Ali Haydar, the former head of the special forces; Ali Aslan, the current chief of staff; Ali Salih, the former commander of the missile corps – Ali Aslan and Ali Duba remain powerful. General Hikmat al-Shihabi, who retired more than a year ago as the chief of staff, remains on good terms with the president.

Last year, two senior officers were removed: General Bashir al-Najjar and General Muhammad Nasif, chief of internal-security intelligence. Recently there were credible reports that General Ali al-Houri, who replaced Nasif in this sensitive position, has been ordered to take Nasif out of mothballs and appoint him as his assistant. The rise of Bashar Asad coincided with the higher profile of General Asef Shawkat, president Asad's brother-in-law. He is seen as a potential major player and the leading candidate in any future security talks between Syria and Israel .

This ongoing reshuffling of Syria's military and security apparatus is, according to the conventional wisdom, aimed at putting together a security team compatible with Bashar Asad and willing to back him militarily if he is challenged. The recent crackdown on Rifaat Asad's supporters, while exaggerated, has more than a kernel of truth. There were unconfirmed and clearly outlandish reports of violent clashes with Rifaat's supporters in the port city of Latakia, and arrests of hundreds in that city as well as in Damascus. While the government denied that clashes had occurred, it was less categorical concerning the arrests, and it did confirm the closing down of an 'illegal' port built by Rifaat and operated by his lieutenants. These developments can be seen in the context of Bashar's ascendancy and/or his father's reportedly frail health. One interpretation is that Rifaat and his son Sumer, who runs the Arab News Network satellite channel in London that is partly financed by the father, were trying to rebuild their base of support in anticipation of a To Whom It May Concern bid for power. Hence the crackdown. Another interpretation is that the crackdown is a preemptive move by the other set of father and son, Hafiz, and Bashar.

Although Rifaat's military power base, Saraya al-Difaa Defense Brigades (the vehicle that allowed him to amass a huge illegal fortune in Lebanon and Syria), was dismantled in 1984, it's an open secret in Damascus that Rifaat maintained his links with a number of people: former officers, some intellectuals, journalists and others, since he has enough

money to keep them on the payroll for a long time.

Syrian officials were very annoyed when Sumer Asad paid a highly publicized visit to Chairman Yasir Arafat in Gaza and called from there for an improved Syrian-Palestinian relationship, and when Rifaat attended King Hassan's funeral in Morocco and made sure that he was very visible, in contrast to the absent Syrian president. Sumer's visit was seen in Damascus as an attempt to cement an old alliance with Arafat, an ancient nemesis of President Asad, that could be useful in influencing succession. Over the years, both Arafat and Asad have interfered in each other's domestic affairs. Arafat, who has been persona non grata in Syria since he opted for his separate arrangements with Israel, is reportedly savoring the opportunity to get back at the Syrian president. That could explain in part Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas's bitter and public invectives against Arafat last August. The man who is seen by his friends as colorful and by his many detractors as mercurial or outrageous compared Arafat to an ugly stripper and called him publicly the son of sixty thousand whores.

Bashar's rise has been meteoric. At age 36 he is seen by many in Syria and others in the region as the heir apparent. His pictures are as ubiquitous in Damascus as his father's. In July 1997, he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel and named commander-in-chief of the Republican Guard. However, the move that led many observers to believe that Bashar is the crown prince was his assignment late last year as the Syrian in charge of the so-called Lebanese file, replacing Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam. Lebanon was seen as Bashar's baptism by fire, the place where he could prove to everybody, and definitely to his father, that he has the right stuff to lead. Since the death of Jordan's King Hussein in February, Bashar has developed a close relationship with King Abdullah II.

Recently, Bashar paid a high-visibility trip to the Gulf states, where he was treated like a head of state. In a major interview with a Saudi publication, he spoke about peace with Israel and said explicitly that, if Israel left Lebanon, Hezbollah would stop its military operations against it. Bashar is depicted as forward looking, a modern young man (as chairman of the Syrian Computer Society, he introduced the Internet to Syria, becoming one of the few lucky Syrians to enter into the e-life) who – unlike the ossified Baath party leaders – supposedly understands the requirements of leading Syria through a difficult transition to a more open economy and a different Middle East.

For all the talk in Washington about the phenomenon of the rising sons in the Arab world, we have yet to see how such succession could occur in a republican context. Generational change in the Arab World has occurred in the last year in three hereditary systems: Morocco, Jordan and Bahrain. In Bahrain and Morocco, there were no surprises. In Jordan, despite a surprise, there was a dynastic succession. The constitution of Syria mandates that the president be 40 years old, and tradition stipulates that he should be a member of the Baath party's National Command. These two requirements have not been met by Bashar. One can still argue that President Asad may not yet have settled in his mind the issue of succession, notwithstanding appearances, and that he is still testing the water and keeping his options open. But Asad is definitely grooming his son, if not to succeed him at least to play a major role and to be one of the pillars of a successor

regime. In the meantime, Bashar will continue to carry out sensitive missions for his father (such as the periodic anticorruption drives designed to contain but not necessarily stamp out graft in the leadership and bureaucracy, balancing conflicting interests in Lebanon, improving relations with Jordan) just as his late brother Basil did before his death in a car accident in 1994. Having Bashar as the influential gatekeeper will ensure that things will remain under control if the president's health deteriorated, to prevent a repeat of the confrontations among senior officers that occurred when Asad was incapacitated in late 1983.

President Asad intimated once when asked about the issue of succession that Syria is not a dynasty. Given his understandable preoccupation with maintaining the stability of Syria and his keen awareness of the vicissitudes of history, he would have to recognize that passing the mantle to his son will not be easy or trouble-free. The man who has ruled Syria for three decades in the best traditions of Caliph Muaawiya (661-80), the brilliant founder of the Umayyad dynasty and arguably one of the shrewdest and wiliest Arab rulers ever, should know that one cannot rule from the grave. President Asad knows that his country is not easy to govern. It took him many years, at high cost and great effort to earn the respect, if not the love, of his people and to convince the skeptics in his own country that his agenda is Syrian – and by extension Arab – and not minoritarian, as his detractors claimed.

Syrians, including those who criticize the glaring domestic shortcomings of the regime, when they see the chaos in Iraq, the civil strife in Turkey and the uncertainty in Lebanon, concede that Asad has given Syria an unprecedented degree of stability, albeit at a high price in terms of diminished human rights. Asad stood his ground against the Israelis and negotiated with dignity. Although the Sunni-Alawi cleavage has been diminishing, given the pace of urbanization and intermarriage, Bashar's succession could be used by his detractors to harp on this divide. Some would argue that enlightened Alawis would be apprehensive at the prospects of dynastic rule because it could potentially backfire against the community.

Syrians have paid dearly for their country's stability. Many still remember the dark days of the great repression, i.e. the low-intensity civil war of 1978-82, culminating in the bloodletting at Hama. When President Asad departs the scene, there will be political jockeying for power, but not necessarily violent confrontations or tanks in the streets, as occurred in 1984. The old leaders may be entrenched and set in their own undemocratic ways, but adventurers they are not. All along the issue of succession in Damascus has been greatly exaggerated, not only in the United States and Israel, but also in Syria and the Arab world. For this state of affairs, the Syrians have themselves to blame, and it is unfortunate that President Asad did not settle this issue or contain it early on. The transition in Syria after Asad may be precarious; however, one can expect various forces in the power structure and interest groups in the society to cooperate to ensure that the transition is violence-free.