

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Syrian Paradox

LITTLE ABOUT SYRIA's natural endowments would lead an analyst to predict that it would have such a central role in Middle Eastern affairs. By most indicators of strategic importance—including size, internal cohesiveness, and wealth—Syria would seem destined to be no more than a minor player, relatively easy for greater powers inside and outside the region to marginalize and ignore.

Despite these apparent manifestations of insignificance, vulnerability, and weakness, Syria has long been an important consideration in U.S. foreign policy toward the greater Middle East. Understanding this paradox is essential to understanding the challenges that Syria poses for U.S. policy-makers. To that end, this chapter offers an overview of Syria's strategic place in the greater Middle East as well as an overview of the principal analytic questions surrounding Bashar al-Assad's presidency.

### Apparent Weakness

Syria today has a population of about 18 million, placing it only in the middle third of Arab League states in terms of size.<sup>1</sup> More than most Arab states, Syria's population is a “fragile mosaic” of ethnic and sectarian communities.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, among Arab states, only Iraq and Lebanon present comparable arrays of distinct communities.

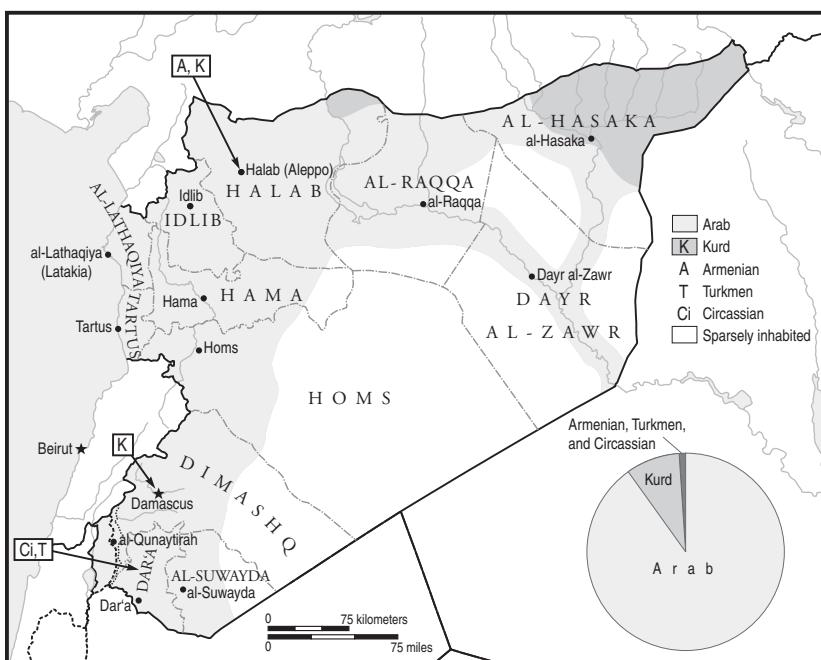
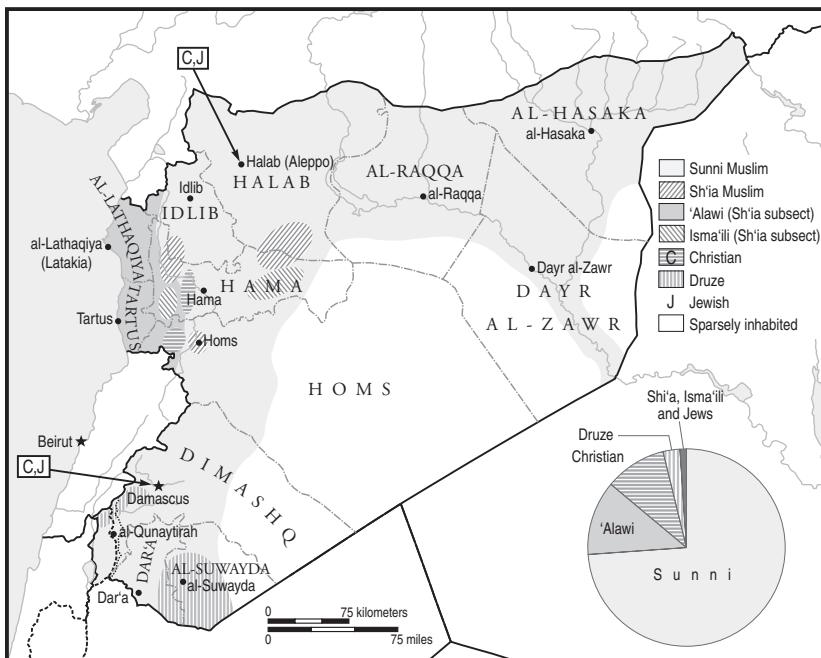
Ninety percent of Syria's population is Arab in ethnicity; another roughly 9 percent is Kurdish, with Armenians, Circassians, and Turkomans filling out the mix.<sup>3</sup> Syria's Arab majority, however, is riven with sectarian cleavages that diminish its coherence as a definer of individual identities. Sunni Muslims are 74 percent of Syria's overall population, but Kurds represent probably 8 percent of that figure, reducing the core Sunni Arab majority to roughly two-thirds of the populace.<sup>4</sup> Another 16 percent of the population, while Arab in ethnicity, consists of various offshoots of Shi'a Islam—Alawis, Druze, and Isma'iliis.<sup>5</sup> (This figure almost certainly includes a few tens of thousands of Twelver Shi'a who are not captured as a distinct community in official Syrian demographic data.) The Alawis are by far the largest community in the category of non-Sunni Muslims; demographers usually estimate Syria's Alawi community at 11–12 percent of the overall population.<sup>6</sup> Christians, of various Orthodox and Uniate traditions and the Latin Rite, along with a smattering of Protestants, make up another 10 percent of the population.<sup>7</sup> Syria's small but historic Jewish community has all but disappeared as a result of emigration in the early 1990s. (For maps of ethnic and religious demography, see p. 3.)

These ethnic and sectarian cleavages have for centuries been the source of considerable social tension in Syria.<sup>8</sup> Even today, there are palpable, historically grounded antagonisms between the Sunni Arab majority and non-Sunni communities. Through much of the twentieth century, these antagonisms were reinforced by the traditional economic dominance of Sunnis in Syria's major cities. They have been reinforced as well by Sunni perceptions of non-Sunni Muslims as heretical and of Christians as willing collaborators with non-Muslims seeking to rule Syria.<sup>9</sup>

In such a climate of ethnic and sectarian antagonism, it was virtually impossible for the entity that emerged as the modern nation-state of Syria in 1946 to integrate its society successfully or forge a cohesive political community. Of course, the difficulties of forging a coherent state structure and national identity in a culturally pluralist society are not unique to Syria; such problems have been felt in other places in the Arab world and, indeed, throughout the postcolonial third world. But these pressures have been undeniably acute in Syria.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, what many Syrians considered the lack of legitimacy of their country's territorial parameters exacerbated the problem of forging a state structure and a national identity. Most politically aware Syrians viewed their

### Syria: Ethnic and Religious Demography



state's territory as having been truncated through Western imperialist intervention. This sense of deprivation went beyond frustration over the creation of the state of Israel in 1947. Politically conscious Syrians shared a historically grounded perception, rooted in the experience of the Arab revolt of 1916–20, that a single state should have been created in historic Syria—*bilad al-Sham* (literally, the northern region, in Arabic)—joining what are today Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza in one sovereign entity.<sup>11</sup>

The gap between the proposition that the Levant should be a single political unit (the notion of *suriya al-kubra*, or Greater Syria<sup>12</sup>) and the far more modest territorial reality of postindependence Syria increased the difficulties in forging a stable state structure or overarching national identity within a fractured society. Of course, difficulties in forging such structures and identities in polities whose borders are incongruent with their social structure and political orientation have also been common experiences among postcolonial nations in other regions of the third world. But this problem was intensified for emerging polities in the Arab world by the apparent contradictions between the existence of individual nation-states, on the one hand, and deep attachments to a common Arab-Islamic culture and a pan-Arab political vision, on the other.<sup>13</sup> And, in the case of Syria, the task was further complicated by the addition of a more specific pan-Syrian political construct.

Since Syria achieved its independence as a modern nation-state in 1946, this accumulated historical baggage has made it a challenging place to govern, always to some degree at apparent risk of coming apart as a society. The pull of supranational identities, whether Arab or Muslim, and subnational identities, either to minority sects or non-Arab ethnicity, has complicated the consolidation of a stable state structure or a genuinely national Syrian identity. For the first quarter-century of its independence, these internal difficulties helped to keep Syria weak and politically unstable, making it vulnerable to manipulation by outside actors.<sup>14</sup> Today, nearly sixty years after independence, the traditional tensions within Syrian society still lie not far below the surface of Syrian politics.

Islamic revivalism among Sunni Muslims, while clearly a regionwide phenomenon during the last three decades or so, has had special resonance in countries like Syria, with a Sunni majority but also significant non-Sunni and non-Muslim communities. Historically, the main exponent of politi-

cally oriented Islamism among Syria's Sunnis has been the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a *salafi* movement self-consciously modeled on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.<sup>15</sup> The Brotherhood has a long history in Syria, originating before independence, and made a forceful play for political power in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Although the Brotherhood as an organization has been suppressed in Syria for more than two decades, the strength and persistence of Islamic revivalism among a significant segment of Syria's Sunnis continues to reinforce the country's sectarian cleavages and adds another layer of complexity to the maintenance of political stability by secular (and non-Sunni) rulers.

Syria's problematic internal political environment is matched by an undistinguished economy. After more than five decades of effort at economic development, Syria remains comparatively unprepossessing in its economic performance. Its gross domestic product per capita is \$3,300 a year, less than that of the most important non-oil-producing economies in the region, including Egypt (\$4,000), Jordan (\$4,300), Morocco (\$4,000), and Tunisia (\$6,900), and nowhere near that of the major oil-producing states of the Persian Gulf.<sup>17</sup> More than a quarter of the labor force still works in the agricultural sector, which is focused on cultivation of cereals, cotton, fruits, and vegetables. Almost 30 percent of the labor force works in industry, but Syria's industrial sectors have long been either state-owned (the model for heavy industries) or heavily protected and subsidized by the state (the tendency for light industries, active predominantly in food processing and textile production). For the most part, these industrial enterprises are not internationally competitive. Syria has failed to develop substantial nonagricultural exports, and its agricultural exports do not earn sizable amounts of foreign exchange.

Syria's most important natural resources are deposits of oil and gas, but its proven reserves of both make it at best a second- or third-tier energy producer for international markets.<sup>18</sup> Syria earns at least 50 percent of its trade revenues from crude oil exports; without this windfall, Syria's overall economic performance would be far less positive. More ominously, without development of new sources, Syria's current proven reserves of oil are projected to run out within a decade, prospectively setting the stage, barring compensating changes, for a precipitous deterioration in the country's economic situation.

## Challenges for U.S. Policy

These apparent manifestations of weakness notwithstanding, Syria has long been an essential consideration in U.S. foreign policy toward the greater Middle East. Syria's centrality to the U.S. agenda in the region stems in part from its strategic location—at the heart of the Levant, in the heart of the Middle East as a whole. But Syria's regional status also stems from the ability of the regime established by Hafiz al-Asad in 1970 to consolidate a sufficiently stable domestic platform from which to assert Syrian interests on the regional stage. As he tenaciously worked to make Syria a real player in regional affairs, Asad frequently challenged and almost always complicated the efforts of U.S. policymakers dealing with the Middle East. Since Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father, in July 2000, these challenges have continued into the post–September 11 environment.

The Asad regime's inclination to challenge U.S. Middle East policy has not stemmed primarily from the personal obstreperousness of Syrian leaders, but from a particular assessment of what defending Syrian interests required in the face of the U.S. posture toward the region. The United States is, of course, the chief external backer of the state of Israel—from a Syrian perspective, an expansive power seeking regional hegemony. U.S. military and political support has been critical to allowing Israel to expand its territorial holdings and occupy these lands in defiance of what Syrian leaders frequently describe as “international legitimacy.” From a Syrian vantage point, U.S. policy in the Middle East for much of the last thirty-five years has aimed principally at ensuring Israel’s ability to consolidate and maintain its hegemonic position in the region.

Given this interpretation of the underlying rationale for America’s Middle East policy, the Asad regime has long been concerned to forestall a worst-case scenario in which Syria would be encircled by regimes hostile to its interests, allied to the United States, and docile toward Israel (that is, a Lebanon that has made a separate peace with Israel, a pro-Western Turkey cooperating strategically with the Jewish state, an Iraq with a regime supported by and supportive of the United States, a Jordan ruled by pro-American Hashemites who have sold out the Palestinian cause and forged security ties to Israel, and a rump Palestinian entity). Under these conditions, Syria would be marginalized in regional affairs, with other states free to ignore or undermine its interests. The Asad regime’s efforts to forestall

such a scenario have frequently brought it into conflict with U.S. efforts to promote stability in the Middle East, whether in the Arab-Israeli arena or the region as a whole.

### *Syria and Regional Stability*

Syria has long been a focus for U.S. efforts to stabilize the Arab-Israeli arena. Syria is a leading frontline state, and the Arab-Israeli diplomatic record contains important acknowledgments that a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab world cannot be achieved without the conclusion of a peace agreement between Israel and Syria.<sup>19</sup> More recently, the Arab League's 2002 peace initiative made clear that a settlement between Israel and Syria is a predicate condition for peace between Israel and the Arab world as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

U.S. policy toward Syria in the Arab-Israeli context has fluctuated between efforts to facilitate Israeli-Syrian agreements and attempts to isolate and pressure Damascus to change its terms and tactics for achieving a peaceful settlement.<sup>21</sup> The 1974 Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement brokered by Henry Kissinger marked the beginning of serious U.S. involvement in Israeli-Syrian diplomacy.<sup>22</sup> Jimmy Carter, who came to office eager to pursue a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement, certainly recognized Syria's centrality to that project; in the face of Egyptian and Israeli pressure, however, Carter ultimately gave up on the quest for comprehensive peace, pursuing instead a separate Egyptian-Israeli settlement.<sup>23</sup> During the Reagan administration, when Syria's isolation became an important objective of U.S. Middle East policy, the United States pursued a "Lebanon First" option for Arab-Israeli peacemaking as well as a "Jordanian option" with regard to the Palestinian question; neither course proved productive.<sup>24</sup> The administration of George H. W. Bush returned to the goal of a comprehensive peace, with a concomitant refocusing of diplomatic effort on Syria, by convening the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference.<sup>25</sup> President Bill Clinton picked up on his predecessor's efforts and worked until his last year in office to broker an Israeli-Syrian settlement.<sup>26</sup> The administration of George W. Bush, by contrast, has declined to engage on the Syrian track, preferring to press Damascus in the context of the war on terror. In the end, no administration, Democratic or Republican, has been able to escape the ineluctable logic of Kissinger's observation that the Arabs cannot make war without Egypt and cannot make peace without Syria.

More generally, Syria has been, and almost certainly will continue to be, an unavoidable point of reference for U.S. efforts to forge a regional order that is both more stable and more favorably disposed to the interests of the United States and its allies. Syria has long been considered a critical “swing state” in the regional balance. For the first two and a half decades after World War II, Syria was a constant point of struggle between and among Arab republics and their conservative monarchical rivals in an ongoing contest for regional influence.<sup>27</sup> After 1970, when Hafiz al-Assad came to power, Syria became a considerable player in its own right in this contest. In looking at the evolution of Arabism and dynamics within the Arab League since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, a number of scholars have argued that the dominant trend has been incremental departure away from the overburdening conflict with Israel and toward greater autonomy for individual nation-states to pursue their own interests.<sup>28</sup> Overall, such a generalization seems undeniably true, but throughout the post-1967 period, Syria has often been able to slow the pace of this evolution and in some cases to define its outer limits.<sup>29</sup>

For the United States, Syria has been a long-standing factor in assessments of the regional balance of power. Washington has long considered Syria, in terms of the region’s strategic environment, as somewhere in between those states well-disposed toward a negotiated peace with Israel and strategic cooperation with the United States (Egypt, Jordan, the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the more moderate North African regimes, along with Turkey on the region’s perimeter), on the one hand, and those states opposed or strongly resistant to such developments (the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq under Saddam Hussein), on the other. U.S. efforts to broker an Israeli-Syrian settlement have been motivated not only by an interest in completing the “circle of peace” between Israel and its Arab neighbors, but also by an interest in anchoring Syria squarely in the moderate Arab camp and tipping the regional balance of power against more radical or revisionist actors.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, as the United States has sought to promote these interests following the establishment of the Asad regime in 1970, it has had to cope with Syrian resistance on a variety of fronts. Under Hafiz al-Assad, the Syrian leadership was chronically concerned that the U.S. approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking would not decisively address the issue of the return of occupied territory. From this perspective, if Syria were not steadfast in defending

its diplomatic position, it risked not regaining the Golan Heights lost to Israel during the 1967 war (this suspicion intensified after the government of Menachem Begin annexed the Golan in 1981). There was a concomitant concern that stateless Palestinians might someday act to destabilize Syria; this scenario played itself out in 1970 in Jordan and later that decade in Lebanon, and the Asad regime was determined to forestall a similar turn of events in Syria. Prodded by these concerns, Syria pushed consistently for more than two decades for a comprehensive settlement to Israel's conflicts with its Arab neighbors on a basis that ensured Syria would regain the territory on the Golan Heights.<sup>31</sup>

This meant that Damascus often opposed the preferred direction of U.S. administrations with regard to Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Most notably, in the late 1970s, Asad was bitterly opposed to Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat's peace initiative toward Israel, and resented President Carter's abandonment of a prospective reconvening of the abortive 1973 Geneva peace conference to shepherd separate Israeli-Egyptian peace talks that culminated in the Camp David Accords of 1979.<sup>32</sup> Asad was concerned throughout the 1980s about a possible deal between Israel and the Palestinians or some sort of Jordanian-Palestinian confederation and, in the 1990s, was sharply critical of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat's pursuit of a separate peace through the Oslo process.<sup>33</sup>

Chronic concern about possible strategic marginalization also prompted Syria to act, at times forcefully, to thwart what Damascus interpreted as further steps by the United States and Israel to encourage its regional isolation. During the cold war, Hafiz al-Asad was adept at playing on the U.S.-Soviet rivalry to forestall Syria's diplomatic isolation in the region, but he was also willing to act unilaterally against U.S. interests in defense of Syria's regional position.<sup>34</sup> Asad's largely successful campaign to repulse Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, undermine the 1983 Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty, and drive U.S. military forces out of Lebanon was a direct challenge to the Reagan administration's initial strategy for the Levant and the Arab-Israeli arena.<sup>35</sup> Syria's inauguration of a strategic alliance with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War—while motivated by a range of considerations, including an interest in winning Iranian clerical endorsement for the Asad regime's legitimacy as it confronted a Sunni Islamist insurgency—ran against American moves throughout the 1980s to bolster Iraq as a bulwark against the Islamic Republic's revolutionary influence.<sup>36</sup>

Such resistance continued after the end of the cold war. During the 1990s Syria's continued alliance with Iran and, in the second half of the decade, its progressive entente with Iraq threatened the integrity of the Clinton administration's policy of "dual containment."<sup>37</sup> More recently, the intensification of Syria's economic ties to Iraq during 2000–03—which gained most of its momentum after Bashar al-Assad had succeeded his father as president and made Syria the leading violator of UN sanctions against Saddam Hussein's regime—was viewed in Washington as a challenge to the Bush administration's efforts in 2001 to reform the sanctions regime and, subsequently, to U.S. preparations to unseat Saddam.<sup>38</sup> As the Bush administration launched its military campaign against Saddam's regime in 2003, Bashar not only opposed the war but authorized actions that worked against U.S. pursuit of its objectives in Iraq.

### *Problematic Behaviors*

As Syria has resisted U.S. efforts to stabilize the region, it has employed means that the United States considers threatening in themselves to regional and international security. The most problematic of these from a U.S. perspective are Syria's support for terrorism and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

Syria is a charter member of the U.S. government's list of state sponsors of terrorism, a status that Damascus has enjoyed since 1979.<sup>39</sup> Historically, the Asad regime has provided various levels of support to an array of terrorist organizations, including the Kurdistan Workers Party and the Japanese Red Army in addition to a range of secular and Islamist Palestinian rejectionists and Lebanese Hizballah. The regime has consistently viewed its connections to these groups as sources of leverage and pressure for pursuing a range of strategic and tactical goals, mostly in the Arab-Israeli arena.

Syria's involvement in international terrorism began in a serious way in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Asad used his intelligence apparatus to build contacts and extend operational guidance and support to a variety of radical Palestinian groups that defined themselves in opposition to Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its interest in a diplomatic settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Asad even brought these groups together in 1984 in a Damascus-based coalition of secular nationalist factions.<sup>40</sup> Syria used these groups as proxies to carry out terrorist attacks, in the region and abroad, not only against Israeli targets but also against

Jordanian and PLO targets. Damascus sponsored these attacks for a variety of tactical aims, all supporting Asad's overarching strategic goals of pressing for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement and preventing Syria's diplomatic marginalization. These tactical aims included undercutting Arafat's standing as the preeminent Palestinian leader, pressing Jordan's King Hussein and Arafat not to conduct direct talks with Israel, and limiting support for Jordanian-PLO cooperation.

Asad's regime also developed links to terrorist organizations in Lebanon—both Palestinian and indigenous Lebanese groups, including the nascent Hizballah—to carry out attacks against Lebanese, Israeli, and Western targets in Lebanon following Israel's 1982 invasion.<sup>41</sup> Again, Damascus encouraged these attacks in support of various tactical goals: preventing the emergence of a Lebanese government willing to sign a separate peace treaty with Israel, undermining U.S. willingness to stay the course in supporting a genuinely independent Lebanese government, and increasing the price that Israel would have to pay to maintain a military presence in southern Lebanon.

Asad overplayed his hand on the terrorism issue in 1986. Spurred by Israel's interception of a Libyan airliner returning Syrian officials to Damascus in February 1985 and Israel's downing of two Syrian fighters in Syrian airspace in November 1985, Syrian Air Force intelligence—almost certainly with Asad's approval—launched two “special operations” to blow up Israeli jetliners in Europe by having passengers unwittingly smuggle bombs aboard the aircraft. The first of these plots, the so-called Hindawi affair, was uncovered at Heathrow Airport in London in April 1986; the second, in Madrid, was thwarted in June of that year. The international reaction to these attempted terrorist acts was severe. Britain broke relations with Syria over the Hindawi affair, and Asad, mindful of the Reagan administration's strike against Libya earlier that year in response to Libyan complicity in terrorist operations in Europe, worried that Syria might also be attacked.<sup>42</sup>

The failed operations in London and Madrid and the international reaction to them forced the Asad regime to change the nature of its support for the terrorist organizations to which it maintained ties. Indeed, according to official U.S. government statements, Syria has not been directly involved in an incident of international terrorism since 1986.<sup>43</sup> Instead of direct involvement in the planning and conduct of terrorist operations, Syria has focused for the last eighteen years on less direct modes of support for groups that the regime can describe as prosecuting guerrilla campaigns of

“national liberation.” By providing indirect support, Damascus still seeks to derive tactical leverage from its ties to terrorist organizations, particularly in the Arab-Israeli arena, but also hopes to minimize the risks of international “blowback” from specific terrorist operations.<sup>44</sup>

Syria has continued to provide safe haven to a range of secular Palestinian radical groups, most significantly the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), which maintains its headquarters in Damascus.<sup>45</sup> As Islamist rejectionism emerged as a force in Palestinian politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Syria began extending similar backing to Hamas and Islamic Jihad; in 1993, after the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles, Damascus created a new rejectionist coalition encompassing both secular and Islamist groups. At this point, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad effectively maintain offices in Damascus.<sup>46</sup> Harboring these groups in Syria allowed (and continues to allow) the Asad regime to demonstrate its support for the Palestinian cause, to exercise some degree of tactical leverage vis-à-vis Israel, and to maintain some residual leverage in its dealings with the PLO.

At the same time, the Syrian leadership appears to have imposed restrictions on the groups’ activities in order to make it harder—but not impossible, in a number of specific instances—to establish a clear operational link between rejectionist figures based in Damascus and specific terrorist attacks in Israel or the West Bank. Training activities, for example, have been relocated to Hizballah and PFLP-GC camps in the Biqa‘a Valley in eastern Lebanon. It also appears that Damascus has prohibited Palestinian groups under its sway, such as the PFLP-GC, from deliberately attacking U.S. or Western targets, either inside or outside the region.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, in the Lebanese context, Syria has used its ties to Hizballah to pursue tactical aims in support of its strategic goals of compelling Israel to negotiate peace on a basis acceptable to the Asad regime and bolstering Syria’s dominant position in Lebanon. Damascus has for many years been the principal conduit for Iranian military supplies going to Hizballah fighters in southern Lebanon. This has given Syria considerable influence over the group’s activities and allowed the Syrian leadership to play the Hizballah “card” in a modulated way, turning up the heat when it wanted to press Israel and moderating Hizballah’s paramilitary operations when it wanted to emphasize the desirability of winning Syrian cooperation.<sup>48</sup> (Of course, Damascus has had to take into account the potential costs it might accrue

from alienating Iran by constraining Hizballah overly much from an Iranian perspective, but the fundamental point about the Asad regime's tactical perspective on Hizballah's paramilitary activities remains valid.)

Even after Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Syria, under the leadership of Bashar al-Asad, has continued to see its ties to Hizballah as an important tactical tool in its posture toward Israel.<sup>49</sup> And, as will be seen, Bashar has allowed Hizballah to become increasingly involved in supporting anti-Israeli terrorist activity in the West Bank and Gaza in the context of the second intifada, formally known as the Intifada al-Aqsa.

As with the Palestinian terrorist groups it supports, Syria has placed limits on Hizballah's terrorist activities in an effort to manage the risk of regional or international blowback. Over the years, Damascus has sought to manage the pace and scope of Hizballah's anti-Israeli operations in Lebanon and across Israel's northern border to forestall direct and extensive military confrontation between Israel and Syria.<sup>50</sup> Syria has little apparent influence over Hizballah's terrorist activities outside of the region, which are carried out by the group's international wing, the so-called Islamic Jihad Organization, with extensive support from Iran. Nevertheless, Syria seems to have barred Hizballah from targeting U.S. or other Western targets in the region.<sup>51</sup> In addition, Syria has overseen Hizballah's evolution as a political party and major player in Lebanon's parliamentary politics since 1992, helping the group to establish an identity apart from its paramilitary and terrorist functions.<sup>52</sup>

On another important issue, Washington has for many years been concerned about Syria's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities. U.S. government assessments have concluded that the Asad regime's efforts to develop WMD capabilities are focused on the achievement of a "strategic deterrent based on ballistic missiles and chemical warfare capabilities, as the ultimate guarantor of regime survival."<sup>53</sup> There is no evidence that Syria has seriously pursued, or is currently pursuing, a nuclear weapons capability, although some analysts continue to raise the possibility of a covert nuclear program.<sup>54</sup>

The heart of Syria's WMD posture is its indigenous chemical warfare (CW) program. Hafiz al-Asad's quest for a CW capability began before the 1973 war, when Egypt transferred munitions filled with mustard agent to Syria; these munitions were not used during the course of the war. Following the 1973 war, Syria began to develop an indigenous CW program, with

assistance from a range of countries, including India, North Korea, and the Soviet Union (and subsequently Russia). These efforts intensified during the 1980s and included the production and weaponization of both blister (mustard) and nerve (sarın) agents.<sup>55</sup> By the 1990s Syria was also producing and weaponizing a more deadly and persistent nerve agent (VX).<sup>56</sup>

Syria's CW arsenal today is assessed by both governmental and non-governmental analysts in the United States and Israel to include stockpiles of mustard, sarin, and VX agent, CW warheads for delivery on surface-to-surface missiles, and aerial bombs for delivery by aircraft.<sup>57</sup> Analysts have also concluded that Syria currently has the largest and most advanced CW program in the Middle East and the most active offensive CW testing program in the region.<sup>58</sup> Syria is not a signatory to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Syria's development of CW capabilities was accompanied by procurement of ballistic missiles to serve as potential delivery systems for weaponized CW agent. Syria began to build up its ballistic missile capabilities in the late 1960s, focusing originally on battlefield support and tactical missiles. During the 1973 war, Syria used conventionally armed, Soviet-origin, Frog-7 battlefield support missiles against civilian settlements in northern Israel. After the 1973 war, Syria sought to develop a more strategically capable missile force, starting with the procurement of its first SCUD-B missiles from North Korea in 1974.<sup>59</sup> The expansion of Syria's missile force continued during the 1980s and 1990s with the procurement of additional SCUD-Bs, SCUD-Cs, and SCUD-Ds from North Korea.

Currently, Syria's ballistic missile arsenal is assessed by nongovernmental analysts in the United States and Israel to include 200 SCUD-Bs, 60–120 SCUD-Cs, and an uncertain but still small force of SCUD-Ds.<sup>60</sup> These platforms give Syria a capability to deliver conventional or CW warheads against targets in countries in the region allied to the United States, including Israel. In addition, Syria continues to maintain a force of two hundred SS-21 tactical missiles (the Frog-7 follow-on). Beyond this, Syria has over the years developed the capability to produce its own specimens of the various missiles in its inventory and both liquid and solid propellants through acquisition of necessary technology from North Korea and Iran, according to congressional testimony by U.S. intelligence officials.<sup>61</sup>

To this list of Syrian behaviors that are problematic from an American policy perspective, one should add Syria's long-standing domination of its Lebanese neighbor. Starting with Syria's intervention in the Lebanese civil

war in 1976, Hafiz al-Asad worked tenaciously to build up an essentially hegemonic position in Lebanon. The elder Asad defended this position throughout his presidency, and it has been maintained by Bashar.

The U.S. posture toward Syria's domination of Lebanon has evolved over the last three decades, moving from an attitude of acceptance and even support during the 1970s to one of criticism and resistance for the past twenty years. Effecting Lebanon's autonomy from Syrian influence was one of the goals behind President Reagan's intervention in Lebanese affairs in the early 1980s. Although the Reagan administration effectively abandoned Lebanon to Syrian hegemony in the mid-1980s, the United States has never subsequently accepted Syria's controlling role there.<sup>62</sup> Since the 1980s the removal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the promotion of greater effective Lebanese independence have been stated U.S. policy goals, even if successive administrations were not especially assiduous in pursuit of these goals.<sup>63</sup> More recently, the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004, calling for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, has renewed debate over how high a priority U.S. policymakers should ascribe to this goal.<sup>64</sup> This debate has intensified in the aftermath of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination in February 2005.

## The Post–September 11 Agenda

As the foregoing rehearsal makes clear, most Syrian behaviors that the United States considers threatening or offensive originated well before September 11, 2001. Those behaviors include not only support for terrorism, development of WMD capabilities, and maintenance of a hegemonic posture in Lebanon, but also (until 1997) involvement in narcotics trafficking.<sup>65</sup>

This long record makes Syria, in many ways, a paradigmatic "rogue regime."<sup>66</sup> That record notwithstanding, the United States has never, at least until recently, treated Syria in the same manner as other Middle Eastern rogues, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran or Iraq under Saddam. Washington has consistently maintained normal diplomatic relations with Damascus; even after the notorious Hindawi affair of 1986, the United States, unlike Britain, which broke diplomatic relations altogether, only recalled its ambassador for consultations. Similarly, while the designation of Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism brings the automatic imposition of specific U.S. sanctions on Damascus, Syria is the only state sponsor that has never been

placed under comprehensive trade and economic sanctions.<sup>67</sup> And successive administrations have usually left Syria out of their more categorical statements about rogue regimes.<sup>68</sup>

For much of this period, the centrality of Syria to Arab-Israeli peace-making and its status as a “swing state” in the region have kept successive administrations from any fundamental rupture with the Asad regime. However, the September 11 attacks and the prosecution of the global war on terror have made undesirable Syrian behaviors increasingly problematic from a U.S. standpoint.<sup>69</sup> In the context of the global war on terror, Syria’s prominence is almost self-generating. Indeed, Syria falls into that particularly troublesome category, identified by the Bush administration, of states with terrorist links simultaneously maintaining or pursuing weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Syria’s authoritarian order stands in sharp contradiction to U.S. interests—as part of a program for attacking the roots of Islamist violence—in promoting greater political openness, popular participation in decisionmaking, and economic and social liberalization in the Arab and Muslim worlds.<sup>71</sup>

Syria’s status as a state sponsor of terrorism pursuing WMD capabilities was bound to become a source of increasing friction between Washington and Damascus. And, without an active and ongoing Syrian track of the peace process, Damascus lost an important part of its protection against American opprobrium. Syria, under the new leadership of Bashar al-Assad, offered the United States intelligence cooperation against al-Qaeda and related groups in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, but did nothing to reverse its own terrorist ties.<sup>72</sup>

Increased U.S. frustration with Syrian behavior was clearly reflected in the groundswell of congressional momentum after the September 11 attacks that ultimately led to the enactment of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act. The legislation was designed to mandate the imposition of more punitive restrictions on U.S.-Syrian diplomatic and economic interaction. For at least some of its supporters, the measure was also meant to serve as a precursor for subsequent legislation, modeled after the Iraq Liberation Act and the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which would mandate support for Syrian oppositionists and impose secondary sanctions on countries continuing to do business with or invest in Syria.

For two years the Bush administration fended off congressional pressure to pass the Syria Accountability Act. In 2002 State Department officials cited

Syria's cooperation against al-Qaeda to forestall congressional action on the bill.<sup>73</sup> As the administration worked in 2002 and early 2003 to define its approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking and prepare for war in Iraq, the White House continued to hold Congress at bay by citing the need for maximum diplomatic flexibility.<sup>74</sup>

Of course, during the same period, Syria was adding to the list of U.S. grievances against it by its continuing violations of UN sanctions imposed on Saddam's Iraq, by official Syrian complicity in the transfer of military and dual-use items to Iraq, and by Syrian facilitation of the movement of so-called "foreign fighters" across the border into Iraq in the early days of the war.<sup>75</sup> Once the war had been fought and Syria did not meet U.S. demands to change several problematic behaviors, especially with regard to Syrian links to Palestinian terrorist organizations and Lebanese Hezbollah, the administration's willingness to oppose congressional action on the Syria Accountability Act weakened. The effective suspension of U.S.-Syrian information sharing on al-Qaeda further diminished the executive's inclination to resist new legislative measures against Syria.<sup>76</sup> Ultimately, Congress completed action on the Syria Accountability Act in November 2003, and President Bush signed the bill into law the following month.<sup>77</sup> Pursuant to the law, President Bush issued an executive order imposing new economic sanctions on Syria in May 2004.<sup>78</sup> The Bush administration's frustration with Syria mounted in the second half of 2004, as the security situation in Iraq continued to deteriorate. As the president began his second term, the assassination of Hariri sparked a further downward spiral in U.S.-Syrian relations, with Washington withdrawing its ambassador from Damascus.

Thus, Syria's standing in Washington has declined significantly since September 11, 2001. In a very pointed way, the decline underscores that the current approach to dealing with Damascus is not working to achieve U.S. policy goals. As the U.S.-Syrian relationship has deteriorated, disagreements within the U.S. policy community (and between the United States and its allies) over the optimal course for dealing with Syria have intensified.

This situation raises fundamental questions about the appropriate direction for U.S. policy toward Syria. What is the optimal course for changing problematic Syrian behaviors in the context of the global war on terror?

—Should Washington continue ratcheting up economic, political, and rhetorical pressure on Damascus? How likely is such a course to produce significant changes in Syrian behavior?

—Or, should the United States place Syria in the same category as Afghanistan under the Taliban and Iraq under Saddam Hussein—states for which the only way to stop threatening policies was through coercive regime change? If so, how should regime change be pursued in the Syrian case, and what sort of political structures might replace the current order?

—Alternatively, could the United States get Syria to alter problematic behaviors through carrots-and-sticks engagement, along the lines that the Clinton and Bush administrations pursued toward Libya? If so, what would an effective package of incentives and disincentives include and how much change in Syrian behavior could that package induce?

It will be difficult for a U.S. administration to continue indefinitely a course that does not address and resolve the challenges to U.S. interests posed by problematic Syrian behaviors, given the ongoing war on terror and the elevated importance of the Middle East as the principal battleground in that war. Thus, the United States will have to come to grips with the problem of formulating a coherent Syria policy.

## Analytic Uncertainties

Obviously, American policymakers cannot make sound decisions about U.S. policy toward Syria unless their choices are grounded in genuinely insightful assessments of Syrian intentions, motivations, and constraints. Yet, at precisely the time that U.S. officials need to be making sound choices about policy toward Syria, the level of analytic uncertainty about Syria's leadership and regional agenda has risen precipitously.

For thirty years, from 1970 until 2000, U.S. officials concerned with Syria and the Middle East dealt with the increasingly familiar and, in retrospect, rather steady figure of Hafiz al-Assad. Asad's longevity in office, his unquestioned authority in Syria, and his usually careful and strategic approach to regional affairs gave American policymakers a relative degree of analytic clarity about Syria's long-term goals, tactical preferences, and perceived constraints. However, since Hafiz al-Assad's death in June 2000 and the accession of his son Bashar to the presidency, that relative degree of analytic clarity about Syria has declined significantly.

Much of the current uncertainty revolves around questions about Bashar al-Assad's leadership. Four and a half years into Bashar's presidency, there is little analytic consensus about the quality of his leadership, his inclinations

on key domestic and foreign policy issues, or the degree of influence he really exercises over Syria's internal and external policies. Perceptions of Bashar outside of Syria have fluctuated significantly since his inauguration. Initially, there was appreciable optimism about Syria's new leader. Despite widespread awareness of the constraints on Bashar and the challenges he would face in consolidating and maintaining his position, there was also a sense that he was potentially a different sort of leader from his father. Some observers expected that Bashar's exposure to the West during his postgraduate medical education in Britain would give him a more progressive outlook than his father or the surviving members of the inner circle.<sup>79</sup> Others anticipated that generational succession in Syria could ultimately have a transformative impact on the nature of the Syrian regime.<sup>80</sup> At this point, however, there is a widely held perception that political and economic reforms have not come as fast under Bashar's leadership as some had anticipated or as Syria's many pressing problems demand.<sup>81</sup>

Why has change come so slowly and what does that mean about Bashar al-Assad as a national leader? Several competing and, for the most part, contradictory explanations have been advanced for the current state of affairs, each with its own implications regarding future possibilities for reform in Syria. Three conflicting images of Bashar as national leader currently dominate analytic debates and policy arguments about Syria. These may be summarily described as "Bashar as closet reformer," "Bashar as loyal son," and "Bashar as neophyte."

#### *Bashar as Closet Reformer*

The first image presents Bashar as someone who recognizes Syria's backwardness, wants to reform the system he inherited from his father, and seeks to improve Syria's relations with the West, particularly the United States. In this image, however, Bashar is constrained in acting on these impulses by his continuing need for support from an old guard of senior officials in the government and security apparatus. These officials, who served Hafiz al-Assad for decades, are not interested in reforms that would undermine their authority or reduce their families' opportunities for gain through corruption and control over lucrative sectoral monopolies.

The closet-reformer view has two variants, one relatively optimistic and the other relatively pessimistic about Bashar's chances for changing Syria. The more optimistic variant suggests that, over time, as Bashar is able to

consolidate power and replace the old guard as it passes from the scene with younger officials who share his interest in reform, he may be able to implement fundamental changes in the system he inherited from his father.<sup>82</sup> The more pessimistic variant presents Bashar as, effectively, Syria's Gorbachev, presiding over a system so fraught with internal tensions and contradictions that he cannot pursue fundamental change without risking either removal from office or a collapse of the established order.<sup>83</sup>

### *Bashar as Loyal Son*

In contrast to the first view, this image presents the Syrian president as a force for continuity and stasis (if not retrogression) in Syrian domestic and foreign policy. From this perspective, Bashar is a thoroughgoing product of the system his father built up over three decades, whose principal goal as president is to protect the core constituencies of the Asad regime and preserve the main elements of his father's foreign policy. In this view, Bashar's disinclination to pursue fundamental reforms in Syria's economic and political order makes him very much part of the "problem" in Syria; he can in no way be considered a prospective part of the solution.<sup>84</sup>

Some analysts in the loyal-son school argue that Bashar may indeed be more rejectionist in his approach to Syrian foreign policy than his father, perhaps under the influence of Hizballah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>85</sup> (Of course, the degree to which Hafiz al-Asad's conduct of Syrian foreign policy was influenced by rejectionist ideology concerning Israel and the United States is subject to question, as is discussed in chapter 2.)

### *Bashar as Neophyte*

A third image describes Bashar as a callow and inexperienced leader who is probably not up to the job of being president of Syria. Those who see Bashar through this prism argue that he does not have a real vision—whether reformist or status quo in orientation—for Syria's future or a fully thought-through foreign policy agenda. On both fronts, as a Syrian civil society activist put it, Bashar and his advisers "simply do not know what to do."<sup>86</sup> For proponents of this view, Bashar's inexperience and lack of vision are themselves dangers to regional stability.<sup>87</sup>

Each of these images carries its own implications for U.S. policy; the lack of analytic consensus thus exacerbates the lack of consensus as to the appropriate course for policy. Of course, it is possible to array data points selec-

tively to argue the case for any of the three images. Each of them captures legitimate and important aspects of Bashar's leadership and contemporary Syria's political reality. But none of these images is, in itself, an adequate framework for understanding Syrian politics and policymaking during Bashar al-Assad's presidency. To develop an actionable analytic base for formulating sound U.S. policy, it is necessary to take elements from each of these images and assemble them into a more complicated, nuanced, and multivariable account of Bashar's leadership and the realities of Syrian politics today. This is the task to which the bulk of this book is devoted. From this base, it should be possible at the end to evaluate which of the options available to U.S. policymakers—continuing the present course, shifting to a posture of promoting regime change, or moving to serious carrots-and-sticks engagement—is most likely to promote U.S. policy goals with regard to Syria.