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U.S. FIRMNESS NEEDED TO PRESS A NEW ASSAD TO BUILD A NEW SYRIA

JAMES PHILLIPS

The death of Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad on June 10 injected additional uncertainty into the volatile Middle East. Eventually, however, Assad's death could contribute to the long-term peace and stability of this troubled region. Assad imposed rigid stability in Syria but fomented instability in Lebanon and promoted terrorism against Israel. The implacable Syrian leader was a formidable obstacle to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement, and he rebuffed repeated American efforts to broker a compromise settlement with Israel.

Assad's son and chosen successor, Bashar, may eventually prove to be more amenable to peace with Israel, but first he must consolidate power. In the meantime, the United States should warn Bashar that it will hold Syria responsible for peace in Lebanon and insist that Syria end its support of terrorism if it is to gain acceptance as a serious negotiating partner for peace, ease its international isolation, and receive foreign support for long-overdue economic reforms.

Assad and Son. Hafez al-Assad rose through the ranks of Syria's military to seize power in 1970 and impose harsh political stability on a country roiled by two decades of short-lived governments. His repressive regime ruthlessly crushed all opposition and was resented at home and distrusted abroad. Under Assad's shrewd leadership, however, Syria staked a claim to Arab primacy as Israel's most relentless foe and the Soviet Union's closest Middle East ally.

Assad built up Syria's army with Soviet arms financed by the Arab oil states; nevertheless, Israel scored major military victories over Syria in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the 1982 war in Lebanon. Unable to defeat Israel on the battlefield, Assad resorted to a shadow war by proxy through Lebanese and Palestinian terrorist groups. These surrogates helped Assad cement his hegemony over Lebanon and forced Israel to withdraw from its Lebanese security zone.

Thirty-four-year-old Bashar Assad, an ophthalmologist who studied in Britain, is a latecomer to Syrian politics who lacks his father's violent history. He was called home from London and groomed for power only after the 1994 death of his older brother. Unlike his father, Bashar has traveled extensively and favors the liberalization of Syria's stagnant socialist economy. The Westernized Bashar is likely to be more pragmatic than his father, who was a hard-line ideologue, but is unlikely to have the same Machiavellian political skills or ruthlessness.

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Kathryn and Shelby
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Recently, Bashar spearheaded an anti-corruption drive that allowed him to replace some of his father's old-guard lieutenants with his own supporters. Now that Bashar is on his own, however, he is likely to face increased resistance to reform, particularly from entrenched bureaucrats and prominent Alawite clans who profit from the old system. Assad's Alawite religious minority, which comprises roughly 11 percent of Syria's population of 17 million, dominates the regime.

Bashar's uncle, Rifaat Assad, already has challenged his right to rule. Rifaat, a strong-willed billionaire, was exiled from Syria after trying to seize power in 1983. Many believe that Rifaat has cultivated clandestine support within the military and secret police, the twin pillars of the regime. Rifaat also controls a London-based satellite television station that has broadcast his denunciation of Bashar's succession as a "farce and an unconstitutional piece of theater." Rifaat is unlikely to provoke an immediate confrontation, but he has positioned himself as an alternative to Bashar if the younger Assad cannot retain the confidence of the Alawite elite. Other ambitious Alawites also could challenge Bashar, and Syria's majority Sunni population, which is likely to become increasingly restless under Alawite rule, eventually will pose a political challenge to whichever Alawite prevails.

Implications for the U.S. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Assad's death does not set back Arab-Israeli peace prospects; instead, it removes a major obstacle to peace. Assad repeatedly demonstrated that he would not sign a peace treaty on terms acceptable to Israel, although the Barak government had gone further than any previous Israeli government to meet his demands. The sad truth is that Assad could not have signed a treaty without jeopardizing his iron-fisted rule. Without an Israeli scapegoat, Assad would have had growing difficulties justifying the harsh oppression, heavy militarization, and economic sacrifice intrinsic to his rule.

Bashar, on the other hand, may not be wedded to his father's heavy-handed leadership style. He appears to be serious about economic reform, perhaps because he has concluded that his political

future depends on reviving the lethargic Syrian economy rather than on leading an Arab crusade against Israel. Bashar has spoken about the need to open Syria's economy to foreign trade and investment; if he intends to follow through, he must realize that peace with Israel would assist his reform efforts.

The United States should make every effort to convince Syria's new ruler that:

- His efforts to modernize Syria's economy and ease Syria's international isolation are doomed unless Damascus abandons its support for terrorism and negotiates peace with Israel.
- Syria will be held responsible for the actions of its terrorist allies. The Clinton Administration should no longer ignore Syrian support for terrorist groups operating in Syrian-dominated Lebanon. In the event of any Lebanon-based terrorist attacks against Israel, the United States should support Israel's threatened military reprisals against Syrian military forces in Lebanon.
- Syria should abide by its commitments under the 1989 Taif agreement to withdraw from Lebanon and respect Lebanese sovereignty and independence.

The Clinton Administration also should suspend its risky efforts to broker a rapid Syrian-Israeli peace settlement before the end of Clinton's term. Bashar is unlikely to risk any major departure from his father's hard-line foreign policy until he has consolidated his power. The next administration will have to convince Bashar that his long-term political prospects depend on abandoning the use of terrorism and working for a stable and peaceful region. Only then will Bashar be able to bring economic prosperity to his impoverished country.

—James Phillips is a Research Fellow specializing in Middle Eastern affairs in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.