



Syria: An introduction

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This note provides an introduction to Syria, its politics, history, and international relations. It gives an overview of Syria's political system and examines the rule of President Bashar al-Assad, who won a second term of office on 29 May 2007. The note also considers Syria's human rights record. In addition, it examines Syria's relationships within the Middle East – with Lebanon, Israel, Iraq and Iran – and with the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom. Finally, it provides suggestions for further reading.

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1 Background

1.1 Geography

The Syrian Arab Republic has an area of 185,180 square km (71,498 square miles). Turkey lies to the north and has an 822km border with Syria. Iraq is located to the east and south-east (with a border of 605km). To the south is Jordan with which Syria shares a 375km border, and the western border is shared with Israel (76km) and Lebanon (375km). A short Mediterranean coastline of 193km extends between Lebanon and Turkey. Israel continues to occupy 1,295km of Syrian territory on the strategic Golan Heights, which it captured in 1967 and annexed in 1981. Syria's terrain is primarily semi-arid desert. Syria's natural resources include: petroleum, phosphates, chrome and manganese ores, asphalt, iron ore, rock salt, marble, gypsum and hydropower. Approximately a quarter of Syria's territory (24.8%) is arable land.¹



Source: CIA World Factbook

1.2 Population

Syria's population is estimated to be 20.18 million. The majority is predominantly Arab (around 90%), with Kurds, Armenians and other smaller groups making up the remaining 10%. Around 40,000 people live in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights – 20,000 Arabs and about 20,000 Israeli settlers. The majority of the population are Sunni Muslims (around 74%), yet the ruling elite is drawn primarily from the small Alawite sect (11%), which is an offshoot of Shi'a Islam. Other religions include a variety of Christian denominations (10%) and Druze and other Muslim sects (5%).²

Arabic is the official language. Other languages in use in Syria include: Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic and Circassian. Many educated Syrians also speak English or French, but English is the more widely understood.

¹ Syria: Country profile, CIA World Factbook, accessed 18 June 2009

² Ibid.

Syria has a young population. 35.9% of the population is between 0 and 14 years, 60.8% is between 15 and 64 years, and 3.4% is 65 years and older. With a median age of just 21.7 years, its population is younger than Iran (which has a median age of 27 years), Lebanon (29.3 years), Jordan's (24.3 years), and Israel (29.1 years), though it is comparable with Iraq (20.4 years). The UK's median age, by contrast, is 40.2 years. Syria's population is growing at an annual rate of 2.1%.³

Most people live in the Euphrates River valley and along the coastal plain, a fertile strip between the coastal mountains and the desert. Overall population density is about 140 per square miles. Education is free and compulsory from ages 6 to 11. The literacy rate of Syrians aged 15 and older is 79.6% (86% for males and 73.6% for females).⁴

1.3 Historical overview

Syria was the centre of one of the most ancient civilizations on earth and dates back 2500 to 2400 BC. Syria was occupied successively by Canaanites, Phoenicians, Hebrews, Arameans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Nabataeans, Byzantines, and, in part, Crusaders before finally coming under the control of the Ottoman Turks. Damascus, settled about 2500 BC, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. It came under Muslim rule in AD 636. Immediately thereafter, the city's power and prestige reached its peak, and it became the capital of the Omayyad Empire, which extended from Spain to India from AD 661 to AD 750. Damascus became a provincial capital of the Mameluke Empire around 1260. It was largely destroyed in 1400 by Tamerlane, the Mongol conqueror, who removed many of its craftsmen to Samarkand. Rebuilt, it continued to serve as a capital until 1516. In 1517, it fell under Ottoman rule. The Ottomans remained for the next 400 years, except for a brief occupation by Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt from 1832 to 1840.

In 1920, an independent Arab Kingdom of Syria was established under King Faysal of the Hashemite family, who later became King of Iraq. However, his rule over Syria ended after only a few months, following the clash between his Syrian Arab forces and regular French forces at the battle of Maysalun. French troops occupied Syria later that year after the League of Nations put Syria under French mandate. With the fall of France in 1940, Syria came under the control of the Vichy Government until the British and Free French occupied the country in July 1941. Continuing pressure from Syrian nationalist groups forced the French to evacuate their troops in April 1946, leaving the country in the hands of a republican government that had been formed during the mandate.

Although rapid economic development followed the declaration of independence of 17 April 1946, Syrian politics from independence to the late 1960s were marked by upheaval. A series of military coups, begun in 1949, undermined civilian rule and led to army colonel Adib Shishakli's seizure of power in 1951. After the overthrow of President Shishakli in a 1954 coup, continued political maneuvering supported by competing factions in the military eventually brought Arab nationalist and socialist elements to power. Syria's political instability during the years after the 1954 coup, the similarities between Syrian and Egyptian policies, and the appeal of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's leadership in the wake of the 1956 Suez crisis created support in Syria for union with Egypt. On 1 February 1958, the two countries merged to create the United Arab Republic and all Syrian political parties ceased overt activities. However, the union was not a success. Following a military coup on 28 September 1961, Syria seceded, reestablishing itself as the Syrian Arab Republic. Instability

³ [Syria: Country profile](#), CIA World Factbook, accessed 18 June 2009

⁴ *Ibid.*

characterized the next 18 months, with various coups culminating on 8 March 1963 in the installation by leftist Syrian Army officers of the National Council of the Revolutionary Command (NCRC). The takeover was engineered by members of the Ba'ath Party, which had been active in Syria and other Arab countries since the late 1940s. The new cabinet was dominated by Ba'ath members.

The new Syrian Government explored the possibility of federation with Egypt and Ba'ath-controlled Iraq. An agreement was concluded in Cairo on April 17, 1963, for a referendum on unity to be held in September 1963. However, serious disagreements among the parties soon developed, and the tripartite federation failed to materialise. Thereafter, the Ba'ath regimes in Syria and Iraq began to work for bilateral unity. These plans foundered in November 1963, when the Ba'ath regime in Iraq was overthrown. In May 1964, President Amin Hafiz of the NCRC promulgated a provisional constitution providing for a National Council of the Revolution (NCR), an appointed legislature composed of representatives of mass organizations – labour, peasant, and professional unions – a presidential council, in which executive power was vested, and a cabinet. On 23 February 1966, a group of army officers carried out a successful, intra-party coup, imprisoned President Hafiz, dissolved the cabinet and the NCR, abrogated the provisional constitution, and designated a regionalist, civilian Ba'ath government.

The defeat of the Syrians and Egyptians in the June 1967 war with Israel weakened the radical socialist regime established by the 1966 coup. Conflict developed between a moderate military wing and a more extremist civilian wing of the Ba'ath Party. The 1970 retreat of Syrian forces sent to aid the PLO during the "Black September" hostilities with Jordan reflected this political disagreement within the ruling Ba'ath leadership. On 13 November 1970, Minister of Defense Hafiz al-Assad effected a bloodless military coup, ousting the civilian party leadership and assuming the role of prime minister.

Upon assuming power, Hafiz al-Assad moved quickly to create an organizational infrastructure for his government and to consolidate control. The Provisional Regional Command of Assad's Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party nominated a 173-member legislature, the People's Council, in which the Ba'ath Party took 87 seats. The remaining seats were divided among "popular organizations" and other minor parties. In March 1971, the party held its regional congress and elected a new 21-member Regional Command headed by Assad. In the same month, a national referendum was held to confirm Assad as President for a 7-year term. In March 1972, to broaden the base of his government, Assad formed the National Progressive Front, a coalition of parties led by the Ba'ath Party, and elections were held to establish local councils in each of Syria's 14 governorates. In March 1973, a new Syrian constitution went into effect followed shortly thereafter by parliamentary elections for the People's Council, the first such elections since 1962.

A serious challenge to the regime arose in the late 1970s from fundamentalist Sunni Muslims who rejected the basic values of the secular Ba'ath program and object to rule by the Alawis, whom they consider heretical. From 1976 until its suppression in 1982, the arch-conservative Muslim Brotherhood led an armed insurgency against the regime. In response to an attempted uprising by the brotherhood in February 1982, the government crushed the fundamentalist opposition centered in the city of Hama, leveling parts of the city with artillery fire and causing many thousands of dead and wounded. Since then, public manifestations of anti-regime activity have been very limited.

Syria's 1990 participation in the US-led coalition against Saddam Hussein marked a watershed in Syria's relations both with other Arab states and with the West. Syria participated in the multilateral Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid in October 1991, and during the 1990s engaged in direct, face-to-face negotiations with Israel. These negotiations failed, and there have been no further Syrian-Israeli talks since President Hafiz Al-Assad's meeting with then President Bill Clinton in Geneva in March 2000.

2 Political Situation

2.1 Overview of the political structure

- Syria is a republic under an authoritarian, military-dominated regime.
- Its constitution was adopted on 13 March 1973.
- The legal system is based on a combination of French and Ottoman civil law. Islamic law is used in the family court system. Syria has not accepted compulsory International Court of Justice jurisdiction.
- Syria's head of state is President Bashar al-Assad, who has been in position since 17 July 2000. Vice President Farouk al-Shara oversees foreign policy while Vice President Najah al-Attar oversees cultural policy.
- The head of government is Prime Minister Muhammed Naji al-Utri (since 10 September 2003).
- The cabinet consists of a Council of Ministers which is appointed by the president.
- Syria has a unicameral legislature – the People's Council or Majlis al-Shaab, which has 250 seats. Members are elected by popular vote (universal suffrage: 18 years and older) and serve four-year terms.
- The judicial branch comprises a Supreme Judicial Council, which appoints and dismisses judges and is headed by the president. At the national level, the Supreme Constitutional Court adjudicates electoral disputes and rules on the constitutionality of laws and decrees. Justices are appointed for four-year terms by the president.

2.2 Political developments

The secular, socialist Ba'ath Party, which seized power in a coup in 1963, exerts strong authoritarian control over the country. The current President, Lt-Gen Dr Bashar al-Assad, came to power in mid-2000 following the death of his father, Hafez. He had entered politics following the death of his older brother Basil in a car crash in 1994. His succession was endorsed in an unopposed referendum with 97% of the vote.

Following his inauguration, Bashar al-Assad reiterated his desire to modernise Syria, although he stressed he was not seeking a complete break with the past and would reject Western-style democracy. There were early, tentative steps towards economic and social change, but implementation has been slow. Signs of political reform, such as releasing political prisoners and permitting political discussion groups, have also faded and freedom of expression and association has once again been curtailed. Most of the media is still controlled by the state and party, and a loosening of restrictions after 2000 has been largely reversed. Observers believe the slow progress can be partly ascribed to fears within the

establishment – the army, the Ba’ath Party and the Alawite minority – that change would bring instability and would challenge its position and influence.

As mandated in the constitution, the Ba’ath Party retains primacy in key government ministries (interior, foreign affairs, defence, education, economy and finance), although independents do hold some posts. Recommendations at the Tenth Ba’ath Party Congress in mid-2005 for a move towards a social market economy, a new parties law, a revision of the constitution and emergency law appear to have made little progress. Some steps have been taken to move away from a centrally-controlled economy with a cautious opening up of the banking sector and efforts to attract foreign investment.⁵ Nonetheless, unemployment, corruption and poverty still hamper the economy.

Parliamentary elections for the People’s Assembly took place on 22 April 2007. The National Salvation Front (NSF), an alliance of the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and various liberal, communist and Kurdish parties, did not present candidates for the election. The Muslim Brotherhood had been driven underground in the early 1980s and an uprising in the town of Hama in 1982 was violently suppressed by government forces. Membership is still punishable by death in Syria.

Two-thirds of the Assembly’s 250 seats are reserved for the National Progressive Front (NPF), an alliance of nationalist and left-wing supporters of the government that is dominated by the Ba’ath Party. The remaining 83 seats are for independents. Parliament has only limited powers and can do little more than rubber-stamp government initiatives.

President Bashar al-Assad was nominated by parliament for a second seven-year term and a referendum endorsing the decision was held on 27 May 2007. The Interior Ministry subsequently announced that, as anticipated, the President had received 97% support from the electorate. Some observers suggest that the local elections later this year may be more democratic.⁶ Others believe that, while President Assad himself may be in favour of reform, his lack of authority has reduced him to little more than an arbiter between competing interests within the ruling elite.⁷ Consequently, it is argued that those vested interests in the status quo, coupled with the instability in the region, have reduced the chances for significant political change in the near term.

3 Human Rights

The US State Department and Amnesty International both report that torture and ill-treatment remain commonplace, while freedom of expression and association continues to be severely restricted by the authorities. Both also report a number of instances of arbitrary detention and unfair trials. Women and members of the Kurdish minority continue to face discrimination. During the first half of 2007 the government took a hard line on internal dissent. In May leading dissident Kamal Labwani and prominent political writer Michel Kilo were sentenced to long jail terms. Human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni was also jailed. The punishments drew widespread international condemnation, even from long-standing supporters of Syria.⁸

In its 2008 Human Rights report, published, published on 25 February 2009, the US Department of State delivered a critical verdict on Syria’s human rights record. In terms of political freedom, the report concluded that:

⁵ In contrast to other sectors, the oil sector has always been a special case and depends on foreign investment.

⁶ *Guide to Syria's parliamentary election on 22 April 2007*, BBC Monitoring Election Guide, 3 April 2007

⁷ Jon Leyne, ‘[Syria fails reforms challenge](#)’, BBC News online, 9 June 2005

Syria [...] is a republic under the authoritarian presidential regime of Bashar al-Asad. The president makes key decisions with counsel from a small circle of security advisors, ministers, and senior members of the ruling Ba'ath Party [...] The constitution mandates the primacy of Ba'ath party leaders in state institutions and society. President al-Asad and party leaders, supported by various security services, dominated all three branches of government. In May 2007 President al-Asad was confirmed for another seven-year term in elections that were considered by international and local human rights advocates as neither free nor fair. Civilian authorities maintained effective control of the security forces, and members of the security forces committed numerous, serious human rights abuses.⁹

In terms of human rights, more broadly, the State Department's report found that:

The government's respect for human rights worsened, and it continued to commit serious abuses. The government systematically repressed citizens' abilities to change their government. In a climate of impunity, there were instances of arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life. Members of the security forces tortured and physically abused prisoners and detainees. Security forces arrested and detained individuals without providing just cause, and lengthy pretrial and incommunicado detention remained a serious problem. Considered common practice since 2006, the government violated citizens' privacy rights and imposed significant restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association, amid an atmosphere of government corruption. Security services disrupted meetings of human rights organizations and detained activists, organizers, and other regime critics without due process. In addition, throughout the year the government sentenced to prison several high-profile members of the human rights community, especially individuals affiliated with the national council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), an umbrella organization bringing together a range of reform-minded opposition groups. Violence and societal discrimination against women continued. The influx of Iraqi refugees, moreover, exacerbated the incidence of sexual exploitation, including of minors. The government discriminated against minorities, particularly the Kurds and the Ahvazis, and severely restricted workers' rights.¹⁰

The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office country report on Syria raises similar concerns about the country's human rights record. The FCO states that:

Although there was an initial improvement under President Bashar al-Assad, the human rights situation has deteriorated significantly over the past year and we have a number of concerns about Syria's human rights performance.. Local human rights groups have no legal existence in Syria. A few are tolerated, but they operate in a grey zone. However, over the past few months there has been a marked downturn with harsh sentencing for some Human Rights Defenders in mid-2007 and the recent arrest of members of the National Council for the Damascus Declaration,. Amnesty International was allowed to visit Syria in January 2006, the first time since 1997.

Syria has an embryonic civil society. The Security Services coordinate with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to issue licences for the formation of non-governmental organisations. There are now several hundred non-governmental organisations in Syria mainly focussed on development, environment and women and children's rights. The Head of the State Planning Commission said that the tenth five-year-plan (2006-2010) would assign a more considerable role to civil societies.. However, many non-governmental organisations have an important regime figure spouse or relative as their

⁸ See for example the [open letter to President Assad](#) from Patrick Seale, 18 May 2007

⁹ [2008 Human Rights Report](#), US Department of State, 25 February 2009

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

patron. More politicised non-governmental organisations have so far failed to obtain a license. Therefore these often operate illegally and the activists subject to arrest and trial in the various security courts.

There are 1-1.5 million Kurds in Syria, making them the largest ethnic minority group in the country. Approximately 250,000 of them not entitled to Syrian nationality and have no civil and political rights. The Tenth Baath Party Congress recommended that this issue be tackled, but this has not progressed far. Decree (Decree 49) passed by President Assad in late 2008, has restricted the buying, selling and transfer of property by Kurds. Resident Palestinians in Syria are prevented from voting and restrictions are also placed on their right to own property.

Religious freedom is provided for by the constitution. Formally recognised religious minorities are generally well respected and have full freedom to practise their faith.¹¹

In its recent report on the state of the world's human rights, Amnesty International concluded that in 2009:

the state of emergency, in force since 1963, continued to give [Syrian] security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention. Freedom of expression and association remained strictly controlled. Hundreds of people were arrested and hundreds of others remained imprisoned for political reasons, including prisoners of conscience and others sentenced after unfair trials. Torture and other ill-treatment were committed with impunity; seven deaths as a result were reported. Military Police were reported to have killed at least 17 detainees. Human rights defenders were harassed and persecuted. Members of the Kurdish minority faced discrimination; many were effectively stateless and denied equal access to social and economic rights. Women were subject to discrimination and gender-based violence. Sixteen civilians were killed in a bomb explosion which state media attributed to an armed group.¹²

Likewise, in its *2008 World Report*, Human Rights Watch argued that:

Syria emerged from its international isolation in 2008, but its human rights record remains very poor. The authorities arrested political and human rights activists, censored websites, detained bloggers, and imposed travel bans. Emergency rule, imposed in 1963, remains in effect and Syria's multiple security agencies continue to detain people without arrest warrants. [...] Syrian authorities continue to restrict freedom of expression, and an independent press remains nonexistent. [...] Human rights activists continue to be targets of government harassment and arrest. [...] [Kurds] remain subject to systematic discrimination, including the arbitrary denial of citizenship to an estimated 300,000 Syria-born Kurds [...] Syria's constitution guarantees gender equality, and many women are active in public life, but personal status laws and the penal code contain provisions that discriminate against women and girls.¹³

4 Regional Relations

4.1 Relations with Lebanon

Syria exerted considerable influence over Lebanon throughout the 1990s, following its intervention to halt that country's civil war in the late 1980s. Israel's troop withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 led some Lebanese to question the need for Syria's large military

¹¹ [Country profile: Syria](#), Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 23 March 2009

¹² [Report 2009](#), Amnesty International,

¹³ [World Report 2008](#), Human Rights Watch, p512

and security presence, resulting in 2001 in a partial withdrawal from Beirut and other large cities. By 2004 there was mounting domestic Lebanese and international pressure for a full withdrawal, due in part to a perception of heavy handedness on the part of Damascus in influencing Lebanese political affairs. Suspicion of Syrian involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in early 2005 increased the pressure on Damascus further and provoked widespread popular protests in Lebanon.¹⁴ Within weeks, the pro-Syrian government in Beirut had fallen and Syrian forces had withdrawn completely. By mid-2005 an anti-Syrian majority had taken control of parliament and formed a new government.

Allegations of Syrian interference in Lebanese internal affairs continue to be made. A number of observers claim that Syria has continued to allow equipment and supplies across the border to Hizbollah to help it re-equip after the July-August 2006 conflict with Israel. Furthermore, some claim that Syrian intelligence has carried out, or provided backing for, the assassination of a series of Lebanese political figures, in a bid to destabilise the country and re-establish its own influence. Other allegations have been made of Syrian backing for Fatah al-Islam, a militant Sunni Islamist group based in Palestinian refugee camps in the north of the country, which has been engaged in heavy fighting with Lebanese government forces. The Lebanese government claims Fatah al-Islam is an instrument of Syrian intelligence, while others dispute the allegations of Syrian ties, claiming that the group had previously been courted by the Saudi and US governments as a counterweight to Hizbollah.¹⁵

Damascus refutes allegations that it is interfering in Lebanese internal affairs. Nonetheless, it has taken few steps to strengthen monitoring of the border with Lebanon to halt the supply of weaponry. Furthermore, Lebanese ministers accuse pro-Syrian parties such as Hizbollah of serving Syrian interests in seeking to block the establishment of an international tribunal to prosecute suspects from the Hariri investigation. After months of deadlock, Lebanon's Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora, wrote to the UN Secretary-General in mid-May saying that all attempts to secure parliamentary ratification of the tribunal had been exhausted. Consequently, he requested that the Security Council authorise the tribunal under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which would remove the need for approval by the Lebanese parliament. The Security Council duly voted on 30 May to approve the creation of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The resolution was passed by ten votes to zero, with five abstentions from Russia, China, South Africa, Indonesia and Qatar.¹⁶

On 15 October 2008, after a series of negotiations, Syria and Lebanon established formal diplomatic ties for the first time since the two countries gained independence sixty years ago. However, Syria has not sent an ambassador to Beirut, though it has opened an embassy there. In January 2009, Lebanese diplomat Michel Khoury was named and approved as Lebanon's ambassador to Syria.

Lebanon held parliamentary elections on 7 June 2009. The outcome was a victory for the Western-backed anti-Syrian coalition, which managed to hold on to power with almost the

¹⁴ The Commission declared in its preliminary findings that it was highly unlikely that the Syrian or Lebanese intelligence agencies had been unaware of the assassination plot, adding that there was "converging evidence" pointing at both Lebanese and Syrian involvement in the attack. Syria denied the allegation. Source: [Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1595 \(2005\)](#), S/2005/662, 19 October 2005.

¹⁵ See the regional press commentary in response to the fighting between Lebanese government forces and Fatah al-Islam in May, '[Lebanon media see Syria behind violence](#)', BBC News online, 21 May 2007, and comments made by the US investigative journalist, Seymour Hersh, on [CNN: Your World Today](#), 22 May 2007

¹⁶ [UN Security Council Resolution 1757](#), 30 May 2007

same margin as in the elections in 2005. The bloc won 71 seats in the Lebanese parliament compared with the Hizbollah-led coalition which secured 57 seats. President Obama's speech on engagement with the Middle East in Cairo on 4 June 2009 is cited by many experts as having been important in shoring-up support for the Western-backed bloc. For Syria, which supports the Hizbollah coalition, the results of the election are regarded as a set-back.

4.2 Relations with Israel

The Israeli-Syrian bilateral relationship continues to be dominated by Israel's occupation of the Golan and by Syria's support for Hizbollah and Palestinian militant groups. US-brokered peace talks in 1999 and 2000 made considerable progress towards resolving the Golan issue, but eventually foundered over the question of border demarcation and Syrian access to the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. Relations then deteriorated, reaching a low in October 2003 when Israel mounted an air strike on an alleged training camp for the Palestinian militant groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas in what was its first attack on Syrian territory since the 1973 conflict. Syria and Israel have never concluded a peace treaty, and Syria support for Palestinian militant groups such as Hamas is its direct way of maintaining pressure on Israel. Since 2001, Khaled Meshaal, the head of the Hamas politburo, has lived in exile in Damascus.

An unofficial dialogue involving Syrian and Israeli representatives between 2004 and 2006 led to the formulation of a series of understandings on the Golan and a future peace agreement,¹⁷ but Israel declined to elevate the talks to the official sphere. In April 2007 Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said that Syria would be willing to resume negotiations without pre-conditions. However, the Israeli establishment remains divided over the sincerity of the offer, which some view as a Syrian sop to the West to lessen pressure over the Hariri investigation. The then Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, insisted that Syria should sever its ties with Hizbollah and Palestinian militant groups first. Furthermore, opinion polls in Israel suggest around 66% would be opposed to returning the Golan under a future peace accord.¹⁸

Syria firmly opposed Israel's military operations in Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009. Soon after the start of Israeli air strikes, Syria said that Israel's attack on Gaza "closed the door on the Syrian-Israeli indirect talks". After Israel and Hamas declared as ceasefire, Syria called on fellow Arab countries to suspend the Saudi-sponsored Arab Peace Initiative and demanded, along with Hizbollah and Iran, the unconditional opening of all Israeli crossings into Gaza, echoing Hamas' stance. Although the Gaza conflict may have temporarily suspended the Israeli-Syrian track, it has encouraged calls for greater engagement with certain elements of Hamas. Although Western governments have refrained from direct contact with Hamas leaders, should calls for more engagement grow, Syria could play a key role as an intermediary, though this remains for the moment a distant possibility.

The recent conflict in Gaza temporarily halted talk of a resumption of direct Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations. Indirect, Turkish-mediated talks were announced in May 2008. The goal of the four rounds of talks that were held was to reach common ground on issues related to an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, security arrangements, water, and normalisation of relations – thus moving towards direct negotiations. President Assad has said that eventually direct negotiations would tackle the details of these matters but, when

¹⁷ See ['Israeli, Syrian representatives reach secret understandings'](#), *Ha'aretz* newspaper (Israel), 16 January 2007

¹⁸ ['Israeli spies divided over Syria's peace overtures'](#), *Reuters*, 26 September 2006

dealing with water, Syria would never compromise on its interpretation of the 1967 borders that stretch to the Sea of Galilee. Details of the indirect talks remain unknown. President Assad has publicly stated on several occasions that he would wait for a new US administration before engaging Israel directly. In late 2008, Assad referred twice in public statements to his interest in moving from indirect talks with Israel to direct peace negotiations. In his statements, Assad reiterated demands that direct talks can only take place if Israel assures him that it is prepared to withdraw fully from the Golan Heights and if the US agreed to be a sponsor.

The possibility of direct Syrian-Israeli negotiations depends greatly on the outlook of the new Israeli government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. To date, Netanyahu has said that he is not willing to cede the Golan Heights. On 23 December 2008, while the then Prime Minister Olmert was in Turkey for discussions on negotiations with Syria, Netanyahu remarked:

We are here to say clearly to the people of Israel and the entire world that the government of Israel under Likud's leadership will remain in the Golan and safeguard it as a strategic asset for the country's future [...] It doesn't matter what Olmert says in Ankara. We say the government under my leadership will not withdraw from the Golan.¹⁹

In March 2009, Dore Gold, one of Netanyahu's key advisors, stated that "Netanyahu has made it clear that presently he would like to focus on the Palestinian track". He added that those who "suggest that he will begin by working on the negotiations with Syria are basing themselves on an inaccurate reading of Netanyahu's diplomacy in 1998, during his contacts with Damascus".²⁰ In a major speech on foreign policy on 14 June 2009, Netanyahu again signalled that he would prioritise the Palestinian track over improving relations with Arab states including Syria.²¹

While many experts believe that the foundation for an Israeli-Syrian deal exists, larger strategic issues continue to divide the parties. From Israel's standpoint, there is concern about Syria's ability to guarantee that it would rein in Hizbollah and prevent future attacks against Israel. From Syria's standpoint, a peace agreement with Israel, even a cold peace, could change the entire orientation of its foreign policy away from Iran, a change the Assad government may be unwilling to make without guarantees of diplomatic and financial support from the United States and Europe. Furthermore, Syria may insist that it would be politically difficult to conclude a separate peace agreement with Israel without seeing progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. Other experts also oppose separating the Syrian track from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

4.3 Relations with Iraq

Syria's ties with Arab states improved during early 2007 after two years of difficulties, partly due to a sense in the region that the Damascus had been buoyed by Israel's perceived failure to defeat Hizbollah during the July-August conflict of 2006. Relations with Iraq, which were tense while Saddam Hussein was in power, remained initially strained after the US-led invasion of 2003, due to Iraqi government concerns about alleged Syrian backing for insurgent groups. Since late 2006, though, the two countries have restored diplomatic ties

¹⁹ "Assad considers direct talks as Olmert travels to Turkey", *Jerusalem Post*, 23 December 2008

²⁰ "Netanyahu will focus first on PA, not Syria, senior adviser says", *Jerusalem Post*, 10 March 2009

²¹ "[Full text of Netanyahu's foreign policy speech at Bar Ilan](#)", *Haaretz.com*, 14 June 2009

and Syria participated in regional meetings aimed at tackling the chronic violence and instability which affected Iraq in 2006 and 2007 in particular.

The flight of large numbers of Iraqis to neighbouring countries has impacted on Syria, which is home to an estimated 1.3 Iraqi refugees.²² Conditions appear to be improving after a UN appeal in early 2007. Observers believed that the Alawite elite in Damascus was concerned that the upsurge in sectarian violence in Iraq could spill over into Syria, where sectarian identities and resentments remain strong. At the same time, some contended that the chaos next door had bolstered popular support for the Assad government, as Syrians concluded that their country's secular dictatorship was preferable to the anarchy of a democratic Iraq. Syria contends that it has expended significant resources in hosting displaced Iraqis with very little acknowledgement or support from the Iraqi government or the international community. Iraqi refugees have settled at least temporarily in the Damascus suburbs changing the character of entire neighbourhoods and creating strains on the Syrian domestic economy in the form of inflation, rising rents, housing demands, and impending water and electricity shortages. The sex trade in Syria has grown as many Iraqi women work as prostitutes in Syria. The Iraqi refugee community in Syria has many female-headed households in which mothers lack personal savings and cannot work legally.

Syrian authorities maintained an open-door policy regarding new arrivals until they imposed a visa requirement in September 2007, and demanded more Iraqi government and international assistance. So far the Maliki government in Iraq has provided very little, pledging only \$15 million to Syria in April 2007. In addition, Syria's own somewhat cumbersome rules have dissuaded international aid organisations from working with its inefficient bureaucracy. As a result, international aid organisations claim that Iraqis in Syria have received insufficient support, though it appears that only the most destitute have been forced to return to Iraq.

In 2008, as Iraq stabilised, some refugees returned home. According to UN statistics, more than 220,000 Iraqis who fled abroad (not just to Syria) or were displaced within the country after the 2003 US-led invasion returned home in 2008. Nevertheless, refugees may still be hesitant to return because living standards in Syria are considerably better than in Iraq.

4.4 Relations with Iran

Syria's recent regional isolation, coupled with the mounting international pressure led by the US, appears to have been a factor behind the strengthening of Syrian ties with Iran, which led to the conclusion of a memorandum of understanding on defence issues in mid-2006. Relations with Turkey have also improved after disputes in the late 1990s over the presence of Kurdish PKK fighters on Syrian soil. Bilateral visits in 2004 and 2005 led to cooperation agreements on water and economic matters.

Syria's historic rivalry with Iraq created opportunities for improved Syrian relations with Iran, another natural rival of Iraq. The Syrian-Iranian alliance has always been considered a marriage of convenience as both countries have placed a higher value on regional strategic interests rather than shared cultural and religious affinities. In recent years, as Syria has grown more estranged from the West, Syrian-Iranian relations have improved, and some analysts have called on Western policy-makers to "flip" Syria and woo it away from Iran. Others assert that the foundation of the Syrian-Iranian relationship – a shared concern over a

²² ['Syria: Boost in fortunes for UNHCR operation near Damascus'](#), IRIN news, 15 May 2007

resurgent Iraq, support for Hizbollah in Lebanon, and countering Israel – is deeply rooted in the geopolitics of the region and cannot be easily overturned.

Reliable information on the extent of Iranian influence in Syria is difficult to quantify. Nevertheless, there have been several recent reports of increased Iranian investment and trade with Syria. In the financial sector, Iran has stated its intention to establish a joint Iranian-Syrian bank, possibly involving Bank Saderat and the Commercial Bank of Syria. In the manufacturing and industrial sectors, the Iran Khodro Industrial Group has established two car assembly plants in Syria. Iranian companies have also invested in concrete production, power generation, and urban transportation. In the energy sector, Syria, Iran, Venezuela and Malaysia have established a joint petroleum refinery in Homs, Syria. In addition, Iran, Turkey and Syria reached a new natural gas deal that would allow Iran to export 105 billion cubic feet of natural gas annually to Syria via Turkey. Despite increased Iranian investments, the overall volume of Iranian-Syrian trade remains low. According to the *Economist*, bilateral trade may total between just \$160 and \$400 million. Ironically, perhaps, the total volume of US trade with Syria exceeds that of Iran-Syria.

5 International Relations

5.1 Relations with the United States

In May 2002 a senior government official in the United States said that concerns about Syria's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and its support for militant terrorist groups had led the administration to declare Syria part of an "axis of evil". The allegations were dismissed by Damascus. In May 2004 the US imposed sanctions, citing Syria's sponsorship of terrorism and its failure to prevent militants from entering Iraq to participate in the insurgency. Some sources suggest that the anti-Syrian mood in Washington may have led the US to lobby against a revival of Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations. Washington withdrew its ambassador in 2005 following the Hariri assassination.

Calls from the US bipartisan Iraq Study Group in December 2006 for the US to re-engage diplomatically with Syria and other states in the region met with a lukewarm response from the Bush administration, with US officials saying they feared Syria would demand a reduction in the diplomatic pressure over Lebanon in response to its cooperation on Iraq.

In early 2007, there were signs of a thawing of relations. In April the Democrat Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, travelled to Damascus, the highest-placed US politician to visit for several years. The visit drew condemnation from President Bush, who claimed it lessened the diplomatic pressure on Syria. The following month Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met the Syrian Foreign Minister on the sidelines of a regional meeting on Iraq, a meeting that coincided with reports from US military officials in Baghdad that the flow of militants across the border had reduced as a result of Syrian actions.

Throughout 2008, as Iraq stabilised and reports surfaced of the existence of indirect Syrian-Israeli negotiations via Turkey, more US foreign policy experts began to argue that an incoming US administration should incorporate a policy of diplomatic engagement with Syria as part of a broader reassessment of US strategy in the region. Advocates of engagement with Syria assert that a normalisation of ties with the Assad regime may not only further Middle east peace, but, more broadly, weaken Iran, a key US rival in the region and one of Syria's key patrons. Whether or not this assumption will be born out remains open to question.

In recent months, there have been several developments in US-Syrian relations. On 9 February 2009, the Syrian government announced that the US Department of Commerce had approved an export licence of Boeing 747 spare parts to Syria's national carrier, Syrianair. In March 2009, the US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman (and former US ambassador to Lebanon), and US National Security Council Middle East Director, Daniel Shapiro, travelled to Syria for meetings with high-level Syrian officials. Their trip followed an earlier February 2009 meeting between Feltman and Syria's ambassador to the US. Ambassador Feltman said "there are areas [...] where our interests coincide [...] and these are areas that we can explore".²³ In his speech in Cairo, on 4 June 2009, President Obama did not explicitly mention Syria or outline any proposals for engagement with the Assad regime. However, the tone of the address suggested that his administration could signal a new beginning in the United States' relationship with Arab states as a whole²⁴.

5.2 Relations with the European Union

The European Union has maintained diplomatic and economic relations with Syria, although progress towards an Association Agreement have been stymied by EU concerns about the suspected flow of weapons to Hizbollah and Syria's perceived lack of cooperation in defusing tensions between the Lebanese Government and the pro-Syrian opposition. The EU believes the Association Agreement, when ratified, will lead to progress towards liberalisation of the Syrian economy. After the conclusion of the Doha agreement, France re-established its ties with Syria. As a precondition of improved Franco-Syrian relations, President Assad pledged to formally establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon. Soon thereafter, the EU and Syria initiated an updated Association Agreement which could dramatically increase EU-Syrian trade. According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit*:

The main element of the agreement is the development of free trade for all goods other than agricultural exports to the EU. Syria will immediately gain tariff- and quota-free access to the EU market, while Syrian tariffs on imports from the EU will be phased out over the 12 years. The agreement will also open the way to increased EU aid to Syria, although the EU has already provided substantial support for development projects and economic reforms since negotiations started in the late 1990s.²⁵

5.3 Relations with the United Kingdom

Bilateral diplomatic ties between the United Kingdom and Syria were restored in 1990 after a four year hiatus. The British Government is keen to improve relations, but says that much work needs to be done by Syria to address key areas of concern including Iraq, Lebanon, sponsorship of terrorism, human rights and reform. It has voiced particular concern about Syria's logistical support for Hizbollah, which the UK believes encourages extremism and threatens the region's stability.

In an interview with the BBC on 18 November 2008, during a visit to Syria, the Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, said the following about Syria's role in the Middle East peace process, its involvement in supporting Hizbollah, its relationship with Iran, and its human rights record:

²³ US Department of State website, 7 March 2009

²⁴ For the full text of Obama's speech see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/04/barack-obama-keynote-speech-egypt>

²⁵ *Economist Intelligence Unit* report

Syria has a big potential role to play in stability in the Middle East. It can be a force for stability or it can be a force for instability. Over the last 18 months I've been talking with the Syrian foreign minister about her responsibilities, Syria's responsibilities in the region, in respect of counter-terrorism, in respect of Iraq, in respect of the Middle East peace process, and we've got the chance now to take those discussions further forward. That's what I'm doing here. [...]

Syria certainly has and has had some big questions to answer about the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq, about the situation in Lebanon, about its contribution to the stability of the region. We've been taking up those issues and I think there have been some important signs over the last year or so of Syria understanding the degree of concern and seeking to change some of its actions. I think it's very important that we continue to engage countries like Syria, which wants to be a secular state at the heart of a stable Middle East, and try to explain how it can play a big role in fostering that sort of stability. [...]

I discussed the human rights record of Syria when I met the Syrian foreign minister in London last month, and I'm sure it'll come up again in tomorrow's discussions; how countries behave at home and the sort of role they play abroad are linked in the modern world and they're increasingly visible thanks to the efforts of non-governmental organisations and others to publicise the human rights record. So certainly this is a dialogue that covers a range of issues that are of the British national interest, of the regional interest and of global interest.²⁶

During media interviews in the United States in December 2008, the Foreign Secretary said that “the Syrians can make or break” the Middle East peace process:

The Syrians can – if they support the activities of Hezbollah, which are a threat to peace and security in the region, then they undermine the prospects of the comprehensive peace, the 23-state solution that I talked about. If, in fact, they cut off the flow of arms to Hezbollah, then they make it more possible.

And so when I went to Damascus, I had a very serious and open and frank set of conversations, where I said I thought that 2009 was a big year of decision for Syria. It had choices to make about who its allies were and where its future... Let me just say this about Syria, which is a really important point. It's a secular state, a secular society in the heart of the Middle East [...] which prides itself on its secularism, and it prides itself on standing against Islamism [...] And so I think that Syria has a lot to gain from this comprehensive peace, but it's also got big responsibilities to fulfill. Because whether you think about relations with Lebanon or the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq or the flow of arms to Hezbollah, Syria has got a lot of questions to answer. [...]

Syria and Iran are unlikely bedfellows, given what I have said about Syria being a secular society [...] And it's an unholy alliance. And that's why it's an important year of choice for Syria, and the year of choice in the following way. How does it use its influence with Iran? Because we've got a massive set of issues on the Iran dossier, and the danger of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East set off by the Iranian nuclear weapons program is a threat to all the Arab states as well.²⁷

²⁶ “[Foreign Secretary in Syria](#)”, Interview with BBC Radio 4, 18 November 2008

²⁷ “[Foreign Secretary on Charlie Rose show](#)”, FCO website, 16 December 2008

6 Suggestions for further reading

6.1 Country profiles

- Foreign and Commonwealth Office: <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/about-the-fco/country-profiles/middle-east-north-africa/syria?profile=all>
- Europa World Plus: <http://www.europaworld.com/entry/sy>
- CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/SY.html>

6.2 Articles and reports

- “Rule of law is key to future Israel-Syria peacemaking”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 11 June 2009
- “Can the Assad regime make peace with Israel?”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 21 April 2009
- “Engaging Syria? US constraints and opportunities”, *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report No 183, 11 February 2009
- “Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French experience”, *International Crisis Group*, Middle East briefing No 27, 15 January 2009
- Mona Yacoubian and Scott Lasensky, “Dealing with Damascus: Seeking a greater return on US-Syrian relations”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 2008
- Rime Allaf, “Open for business: Syria’s quest for a political deal”, *Chatham House*, Middle East Programme Briefing Paper 07/03, July 2007
- “Syrian-Palestinian relations after Annapolis”, Transcript of discussion, *Chatham House*, 6 February 2008
- “Syria after Lebanon, Lebanon after Syria”, *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report No 39, 12 April 2005