

Clues to the Syrian Puzzle

Now that even Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak has sung the praises of Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad, there can be no doubt that he is widely regarded as one of the Middle East's most prominent leaders. The fact that he has been able to keep his grip on the reins of power for three decades has led many to view him as one of the more talented and successful leaders in the region. Among the factors that contribute in creating this positive image has been Syria's emergence, under his leadership, from a weak and unviable country to one which projects strength and has perhaps become a regional power determined to exert its influence, if not hegemony, over the entire region.¹

Writings about Asad and his regime usually describe the Syrian ruler as a brilliant politician.² Asad is actually a cautious, balanced, and calculating man. As a leader he is slow to act and tends to be passive in his moves and reactions. This hesitance and passivity, however, may in retrospect have turned out to his advantage, since they have helped him stay out of trouble.³

Asad is also a predictable leader. He tends to prefer maintaining the status quo to change or upheaval. Despite this, during the 1990s Asad succeeded in surprising two U.S. secretaries of state. One of these surprises came in the summer of 1991, when he told James Baker that he was prepared to participate in the Madrid Conference, thus joining the peace process initiated by the United States at the end of the Persian Gulf War.⁴ The other was in December 1999, when Asad told Madeleine Albright that he was prepared to renew Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations.

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Indeed, the renewed negotiations at a high level between Barak and Syrian foreign minister Farouk al-Shara, a senior Syrian leader close to Asad, greatly surprised observers of events in Syria. This move was seen as a significant step and even as an indication of greater readiness and political will than before to settle Syria's conflict with Israel.⁵

Asad's choice to renew negotiations with Israel in December 1999 is widely believed to have arisen from Barak's decision to withdraw Israel's military forces from South Lebanon by July 2000. That move might have deprived Asad of an important bargaining chip in negotiations with Israel. Asad risked losing his ability to apply pressure on Israel through his ally, the Hizballah in southern Lebanon. It is also thought that Asad's readiness to renew negotiations stemmed from his desire to take advantage of U.S. president Bill Clinton's final year in office and the president's manifest desire to leave a legacy of peace in the Middle East.⁶ Whatever the case may be, the many motives that may have motivated Asad to renew negotiations with Israel—and the ultimate fate of these renewed peace negotiations—cannot be understood without understanding the domestic situation in Syria.

Two major issues are now on the Syrian domestic agenda: the question of succession following Asad's inevitable departure from the political scene and the challenge of globalization. In order to understand why Asad has chosen the road of peace, it is imperative to explore these two domestic issues.

The Ruler's Health and the Stability of the Regime

On March 12, 1999, Asad entered his fifth term of office as president of Syria. One month earlier, 99.99 percent of the Syrian public had approved his candidacy in a referendum in which he was the sole candidate.⁷ In an address directed at the People's Assembly in Damascus before which he had been sworn into office, President Asad praised the achievements of his regime, which were, according to him, "great achievements in all spheres of life—in building up the economy, in social services, in education and culture, in the sciences and the arts." Asad continued, "Syria has built a strong infrastructure enabling it to stand firm and to continue progressing towards a more glorious future."⁸

The optimism that Asad wanted to project for external consumption did contain a modicum of truth. Asad's regime does appear stable and his control over the country firm, given the absence of any observable opposition inside or outside Syria. Nevertheless, it was highly significant that he refrained from delivering his address in person from the dais in the People's Assembly. Instead, assembly deputies were handed a printed copy of the president's address, which was later read out over Syrian radio and televi-

sion.⁹ Foreign observers believe that Asad's health prevented him from delivering the address in person.¹⁰ It will be recalled that in December 1998, on the occasion of the first session of the People's Assembly following parliamentary elections, Asad had unusually abstained from making a personal appearance, because of what the Speaker politely called "a severe cold."¹¹ This is confirmed by a long series of stories appearing in the foreign press over the past year reporting the deterioration in Asad's health. After all, he is 69 years old, and suffered a heart attack in 1983. According to reports attributed to U.S. diplomats, the Syrian president had found it difficult to remain focused and think clearly during their meetings and even showed signs of fatigue and apathy.¹²

Observation of Asad's actions in the course of the past year, however, did not reveal any substantive changes. Asad has continued to hold political meetings, albeit limited in scope, and even took a number of trips abroad, most notably his official visit to Russia in July 1999. In the course of the past decade, his public activities were characterized by a limited number of political meetings and his refraining almost entirely from leaving his palace. In fact, it was Asad's practice to appear in public—outside his palace—at a limited number of official functions, such as receptions for visiting foreign dignitaries, or at special public events. Thus, even though the pace of Asad's activities has slowed, which is understandable, nothing seems to have influenced his ability to rule effectively. Moreover, the Syrian political system has grown used to functioning without Asad's active, day-to-day involvement.

Bashar al-Asad and the Question of the Succession

The question of Asad's health has called attention to the issue of succession: this really refers to his intensifying efforts to promote his son Bashar's candidacy to the succession. Bashar, who was born in 1965, came to prominence following the death of his brother Basil, who had been carefully groomed for the succession, in a car accident in January 1994. An ophthalmologist by training, at the time of Basil's death, Bashar was just three months short of completing his medical residency in Britain. He later confessed that he had never asked to engage in any political activity or even dreamed of it, certainly not of becoming president. However, entreaties from his father forced him to come home and fill his late brother's shoes.¹³

With his father's help, Bashar has sought to carve out a position in the Syrian leadership by first building a support base for himself in the army and the security forces. He is increasingly involved in the routine running of the army's affairs.¹⁴ On January 1, 1999, he was promoted to the rank of *'aqid*

(colonel), a rapid promotion for someone who had four years previously held the rank of mere captain. Bashar now serves as commander of an armored brigade in the elite Republican Guard, stationed near Damascus. In addition to this, he is increasing his exposure in the media and to the public at large, taking on additional spheres of responsibility such as an anticorruption campaign, the promotion of technology and modernization in Syria, and, finally, certain foreign affairs issues.

It should be mentioned that it was Asad's eldest son, Basil, who was his father's first choice as the successor. Basil, who was born in March 1962, enjoyed great popularity in Syria and was described as being charismatic and open minded. Basil spent most of his life in the army and even reached the position of brigade commander in the Republican Guard Division, the elite corps charged with protecting the regime. His military career granted his candidacy the legitimacy it required and helped him gain core support within Syria's senior military echelons. On January 21, 1994, Basil was killed in a car accident. With Basil's death, Asad's second son, Bashar, was called to the colors.

In the course of 1998, Bashar—with his father's assistance—rid himself of his most obvious rivals for the succession. In February 1998, Rif'at al-Asad, the president's brother, was dismissed from the position of vice president for security affairs, which he had held since 1985. Although the title was devoid of real content, it nevertheless gave him status and kept him in the race for the succession. No official explanation was given for the dismissal, but it seemed a clear sign of the displeasure Asad felt with Rif'at's pretensions to be a potential successor to the presidency.¹⁵ In July 1998, the veteran chief of the general staff, Hikmat Shihabi, was pensioned off, after having held that position since 1974.¹⁶ Finally, at the end of that year, Bashar took over the "Lebanese Portfolio," a major agenda within the Syrian political establishment. To accomplish this, he had to push aside Vice President Abd-al Halim Khaddam. During 1999, Bashar also began managing other foreign affairs issues, including Syria's ties with the Hizballah organization and Iran.¹⁷ In recent years, Shihabi, Rif'at, and of course Khaddam had been mentioned as possible candidates to succeed Asad. Their dismissal smoothes the way for Bashar to emerge as the leading candidate in that race.

Rif'at still lives in exile abroad and despite setbacks has not given up. He continues to promote a media empire which includes the satellite television network ANN (Arab News Net) and the weekly *'Al-Sha'b al-'Arabi* (*The Arab People*) operating out of London under the management of his son Sumar. Rif'at hopes that his communications media enterprise, which features sharp attacks on the Syrian regime, alongside words of praise for Rif'at's personality and character, will allow him to remain on the political

scene and recruit support from Syrians who follow his TV network or read his weekly. In addition, Rif'at continued to foster his political ties with leaders in the Arab world, ties which were viewed with disfavor by the Syrian regime.¹⁸ In October 1999, Bashar loyalists took measures against Rif'at strongholds in northern Syria. Syrian security forces raided a building complex belonging to Rif'at as well as a private marina that he had set up on state-owned real estate.¹⁹ Asad and his son seem to have been concerned about Rif'at's political activity, which they viewed as a challenge to Bashar. Thus, they decided to take steps against him in order to show that his political pretensions would not be tolerated, and that Bashar, despite his youth and inexperience, is capable of standing up to Rif'at.

A second significant process with an impact on the succession has been in motion during the past few years: the wide-scale replacement of senior-level army and security forces leaders. These replacements, whose ostensible purpose is to infuse new blood into the senior military-security echelons, are creating a generation of new and young commanders; most are from the Alawite community, owe their promotions to Bashar, and are loyal to him. This process, of course, is aimed at strengthening Bashar's position. The assumption is that when matters are put to the test, these young commanders will support him.²⁰ It is crucial, however, to note that some of the most entrenched members of the old guard (such as 'Ali Duba, head of the Military Security Department) remain in position.

In 1998, when Bashar was given responsibility for Lebanon, he also began his involvement in foreign policy issues, engaging both the inter-Arab and international arenas. Bashar made a series of visits to Arab countries: in February and November to Jordan, in July to Saudi Arabia (during which he made a pilgrimage to the holy Ka'ba in Mecca), in August to Bahrain and Kuwait, and in November to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In November 1999, Bashar visited France and met with President Jacques Chirac.²¹

The Syrian regime continues to promote Bashar's image as an energetic and dynamic young leader, with special emphasis on his efforts to bring modernization and openness to Syria, specifically to promote awareness on computers and the Internet in the country. Bashar has on more than one occasion said that he is an accomplished Internet surfer, but has warned that the Web should be surfed with care since enemies of the Arab nation were liable to use it to influence Syrian citizens' world view and values.²²

It is important to emphasize that to date Asad has refrained from an

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open, unequivocal statement that he intends for his son to succeed him. This may well be because he feels that Bashar is not yet completely groomed for the task. Indeed many, both inside and outside Syria, still have doubts regarding Bashar's ability to take over. One problem is his youth: the Syrian constitution requires that the president be at least 40 years old, and Bashar is only 35. The tacit concern is that he lacks not only the experience, but the personal attributes for the task—meaning the “killer instinct” needed to rule a country with such a violent tradition of succession as Syria's.²³ The next several years will be crucial to the succession. Asad will almost certainly take further steps to consolidate his son's status in the Syrian public eye, for example, by engineering his appointment to an official senior position in the regime. Should Asad drop off the political stage too soon, in all likelihood the struggle for the succession, in which Bashar finds himself the lone candidate, will start all over again.²⁴

Bashar is not alone in his struggle to reach the senior leadership. Generally speaking, the problem of infusing new blood in the senior leadership is systemic throughout the regime—not only in the military/security forces but also in civilian/social/economic spheres. Syria's old guard, the men of Asad's generation, are still firmly in charge. This generation of political and economic leaders adhere to a world view that incorporates the concept of Pan-Arabism, as accepted in the Arab world of the sixties and seventies, along with socialist economic principles as practiced by the old Eastern bloc countries. This generation is obviously having a hard time facing up to the changing domestic, regional, and international realities in which Syria finds itself, let alone in steering the country toward closer integration into the world political and economic system. Furthermore, the members of this generation quite understandably are clinging to their posts with an iron grip; it is doubtful whether they will ever relinquish power willingly. The lack of a tradition for the orderly transfer of rule in Syria is thus inexorably leading to a power struggle between the older and the younger generations.

Constraints in the Domestic Arena: The Economic Crisis and Islamic Revival

The problem of succession is not the only one that Asad must deal with in his present term of office. Syria is also mired in a deep, long-term economic crisis. Gross domestic product (GDP) rose by a puny 1.5 percent in 1998; a similar rate was recorded for 1999. Such performance is unacceptable, given Syria's high birthrate. In real terms there has actually been negative growth.²⁵

The chief factors causing these economic difficulties were the recession

on the world markets and the 1998 drop in oil prices. Revenue from oil exports in 1998 fell to roughly \$1.6 billion from about \$2.3 billion the year before. Oil represents about two-thirds of Syria's overall exports. A sharp increase in oil prices in 1999 has helped relieve the crisis somewhat. This will not, however, provide a long-term solution: at the existing rate of production, Syria's oil reserves will be depleted in approximately a decade.²⁶

Agriculture still represents over a quarter of the GDP's potential growth rate. According to official statistics, agriculture flourished in 1998, a record year for grain, fruits, and vegetables. This allowed Syria to export some of these products to neighboring countries, mainly Lebanon. Revenue from agricultural exports was estimated at several hundred million dollars. Nevertheless, in 1999 Syria suffered one of the worst droughts of the twentieth century. The grain, vegetable, fruit, and cotton crops were seriously damaged, falling by up to 30 percent of their 1997 levels. For example, the wheat harvest, one of the mainstays of agriculture in the country, dropped from 4.0 million tons in 1998 to 2.74 million tons in 1999.²⁷

The Syrian regime has shown interest in settling its differences with Islamic circles.

Lebanon is of course important to Syria for political and military reasons, but this tends to overshadow the economic aspect of Syrian-Lebanese relations. The direct and indirect income derived from Syria's presence in Lebanon has over time become an almost indispensable factor in the Syrian economy. For instance, the 500,000 Syrians working in Lebanon remitted up to \$500 million to Syria during 1998.²⁸ Indeed, it is to be expected that in the framework of a possible Israeli-Syrian peace agreement, Syria's presence in, or even hegemony over, Lebanon will be recognized and legitimized by Israel and the United States.

One of Syria's most pressing problems is its natural rate of population increase, which is among the highest in the world. Since the early 1990s the Syrian regime has sought to limit the birthrate, with little success. According to data from the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, the annual birthrate decreased in the 1990s to 2.4 percent as compared with 3.7 percent in the 1980s, but demographers believe that these figures understate the true percentages.²⁹ According to the Syrian press, the country's population at the beginning of 1999 was 17.5 million, and in the course of the past year some 457,000 births were recorded. Fully 45 percent of Syria's population is under the age of 14.³⁰

The natural growth rate of the population has placed a tremendous bur-

den on the country's infrastructure. At the beginning of the 1990s the government invested heavily in electrical, transportation, and water infrastructures. Nonetheless, these improvements have fallen short, and the government has reinstated electrical blackouts and severe rationing of water.³¹ Another phenomenon associated with the high birthrate is rising unemployment, which currently stands at about 30 percent.³²

In 1991, the Syrian government enacted "Law No. 10 for the encouragement of investments." In the past, this law was thought to reflect the clear intention of the government in Damascus to pursue a trend toward economic openness and liberalization. In reality, the Syrian regime has conspicuously abstained from taking any steps in the direction of economic reform. The regime has done nothing to modernize the banking system. Incredibly, Syria has no private banking system, and most of its citizens have no bank accounts. The regime has also refrained from opening up a stock exchange and has abstained from legislation to simplify the complicated bureaucracy currently stifling the economy.³³ The truth is that the regime appears to lack any economic vision whatever, let alone a vision based on reforms to liberalize markets, or integrate Syria into the world economy.

According to official data, by mid-1999, 1,508 projects were approved within the framework of the investment law, drawing investments for 326 billion Syrian pounds (about US\$6 billion), creating some 94,000 jobs.³⁴ However, even official spokesmen admit that, in reality, investments have not added up to more than 20 percent of the figures reported by the government.³⁵

The Ba'th Regime and the Islamic Movement: Along a New Path

Against this grim economic backdrop, it is interesting to observe the surprising rapprochement between the Ba'th regime and Islamic circles in Syria. This phenomenon is an outgrowth of the recognition by these circles of the crushing power of the Ba'th regime (and thus of their own inability to provide an alternative in light of the failure of the Islamic revolt of 1976-1982, culminating with the events in Hama in February 1982). Given its foreign and domestic travails, the Syrian regime has also shown interest in settling its differences with Islamic circles. Thus, the regime has become much more open to manifestations of religious faith all over Syria and even toward religious preaching. The regime released most members of the Islamic movement held in Syrian jails, allowed moderate clerics to be elected as independent candidates to the People's Assembly in the 1990 elections and, finally, allowed the return to Syria of many Islamic Movement leaders who had fled into exile when the Islamic revolution was crushed. Those leaders

who are still in exile have entered into negotiations with representatives of the regime for their return home, although to date the negotiations have not been fruitful.³⁶

In the foreseeable future, there will probably be increasing interest on both sides to continue the dialogue and to draw even closer. This might ensure tranquility and stability in the country, but it could also afford the Islamic movement an opportunity to regain its foothold in Syria. Thus, in the long term, even a limited renewal of Islamic activity in Syria could pose a challenge to the stability of the regime. Sheer demographics might make the Sunni elements in the country more Islamic and the Islamic elements more radical and militant.

The Threat of Globalization

Asad's inaugural address of March 1999 clearly identified globalization as the main threat facing Syria today. Asad said,

We must recognize the fact that realities in the world today are dangerous. These realities mean that there is no international balance, but single polar control, with a double standard and the hegemony of giant monopolies, along with tremendous development of means of telecommunications and information, the widening gap between the rich countries and the developing countries, the flare up of regional and local wars, and of tribal, religious, and ethnic conflicts in many areas in the world. In addition to cultural and economic globalization, national borders and national identities are destroyed and the lives, behavior, value systems, and orders of priority of the peoples are standardized. Today's world is on the brink of becoming a jungle governed by the laws of force and devoid of principles and values for which the peoples have fought in the past.³⁷

The challenge of globalization (i.e., the need to open up to the world and become integrated politically, economically, and technologically) is without a doubt the challenge the regime is facing most reluctantly, despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) that it regards globalization as a threat to its stability, to its very existence. One sign of this reluctance is Syria's lagging acceptance of technological innovations, especially in communications and computers. These innovations pose a direct threat to the wall of isolation the Ba'th regime has built around itself for the past several decades.

The younger generation has certainly shown some willingness to peek over the wall. Asad's son Bashar has led a campaign to increase public awareness of computers. But this should not obscure the fact that the country's connection to the Internet is proceeding at a snail's pace. To date, a paltry 2,500 subscribers, mainly at government ministries and universities, have been connected to the Internet and only a handful of cafes

have been set up for the use of the general public. The Syrian Communications Authority has plans to connect subscribers to the Internet in 2000 at \$100 apiece, a prohibitive sum for most Syrians. By the end of 2000, there will probably be no more than 4,000 Internet subscribers in all of Syria.³⁸

Another area in which there are contradictory indications of change is in Syria's intention to carry out experimental projects in Damascus and Aleppo in 2000 to provide cellular telephones to somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 subscribers.³⁹ Again, progress in this area is agonizingly slow, to no small degree because of domestic criticism of what is seen as exorbitant openness to the outside world. Such criticism is often couched in the language of egalitarianism. For example, an article appearing in the Ba'th Party organ *Al-Ba'th* claims that it would be better to satisfy requests for regular telephones, rather than spending millions of dollars on cellular phones that will serve only a small part of the population. The article went on to say that the Internet is a double-edged sword, and, in view of its infiltration of Syria, it is important to preserve the image and principles of the Syrian people.⁴⁰ This article is just one more expression of the public debate in Syria on this issue, dealing with the social gaps that have begun to emerge in Syrian society in the wake of the highly-limited liberalization measures the Syrian regime had been taking since the beginning of the 1990s. Since these measures have incensed mainstays of the regime, such as the lower-class sectors of the population and the state and party bureaucrats, the regime is understandably ambivalent about future progress toward openness and liberalization.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, the Syrian regime has preferred adhering to the status quo that has emerged since Asad came to power in November 1970. It has been wary of any change in the political, social, and economic spheres of the domestic arena. Despite the increasing awareness in senior echelons of the regime of the need to introduce a broad array of changes, and despite the possibility of a peace agreement being reached with Israel—which would probably accelerate processes of openness and liberalization—there is serious doubt that Asad is capable of reaching this decision. It therefore appears that these matters will have to wait for the next generation (whether Asad's son Bashar or any other successor) that will succeed to power in Damascus.

Syria is now at a crossroads. For Asad, after nearly three decades in office, the most difficult challenge of his presidency is simply to ensure the continued survival of his regime. In his view, this can be accomplished only

through the appointment of his son Bashar to succeed him. The issue of the succession is thus the most immediate and urgent issue on the agenda in Damascus today. The socioeconomic crisis facing the country is seen more as an intermediate-term problem that could eventually cause political instability, as has happened in other Arab countries. Finally, the overarching systemic challenge facing the regime is how to deal with globalization and the question of Syria's integration into the new world order. Asad himself has defined this challenge as the most serious threat facing Syria today.

It is clear that the Syrian regime wants to promote the peace process out of a desire to alleviate domestic pressures and gain access to generous Western financial aid. On the other hand, it is also clear that a peace agreement, should one actually be reached, will only sharpen the regime's dilemma in everything that has to do with opening up to the outside world. Against this doubtful backdrop, the Syrian regime's caution and hesitancy on the road to peace can be easily understood.

The overarching systemic challenge facing the regime is how to deal with globalization.

Notes

1. For Syria's history under Asad, see Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988); Moshe Ma'oz, *The Sphinx of Damascus*, Hebrew edition (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1988).
2. See, for example, Alsdair Drysdale and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1990), 24; see also Ma'oz, *The Sphinx of Damascus*, ix.
3. See Eyal Zisser, "Asad of Syria—The Leader and the Image," *Orient*, no. 35 (February 1994): 247-260.
4. See James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1995), 470-513.
5. See Itamar Rabinovich, "On the Brink of Peace," *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, December 9, 1999 (in Hebrew).
6. See *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, December 24, 1999; *Ma'ariv*, December 31, 1999.
7. For the results of the referendum see *Tishrin*, February 12, 1999.
8. *Tishrin*, March 13, 1999.
9. R. Damascus, March 12, 1999; Syrian TV, March 12, 1999 (transcripts on file at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies' library).
10. *Ha'aretz*, February 15, 1999.
11. Sana (Syrian News Agency), December 17, 1999.
12. *Washington Post*, June 22, 1999; *Ma'ariv*, September 16, 1999.
13. See Eyal Zisser, "Heir Apparent," *New Republic*, November 9, 1999.

14. Ibid.
15. Sana, February 8, 1998.
16. See *al-Hayat*, July 3, 1999; *al-Hayat*, December 26, 1998.
17. See Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, ed., *Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS) XXII*, 1998 (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, forthcoming).
18. Rif'at met in July 1999 with King Muhammad of Morocco and with Yasir 'Arafat. See ANN TV, July 26, 1999.
19. See *al-Hayat*, October 21, 1999; Reuters, October 21, 1999.
20. See Eyal Zisser, "Syria—The Renewed Struggle for Power," in Moshe Ma'oz, Joseph Ginat, and Onn Winckler, eds., *Modern Syria, from Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East* (Brighton, U.K.: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 33-54.
21. See *Tishrin*, November 7, 1999.
22. See *al-Hayat*, October 12, 1997.
23. See Eyal Zisser, "Heir Apparent," *New Republic*, November 9, 1999; Isabel Kershner, "The Asad Dynasty," *Jerusalem Report*, January 17, 2000.
24. See Eyal Zisser, "Syria—The Renewed Struggle for Power," in *Modern Syria*, 33-54.
25. The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report—Syria—1999*, no. 4. See also Reuters, March 16, 1999.
26. The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report—Syria—1998*, no. 4.
27. See Agence France Presse (AFP), May 5, 1999.
28. Ibid.
29. See Onn Winckler, *Demographic Developments and Population Policies in Ba'thist Syria* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999).
30. See *al-Thawra*, January 7, 1999; *Tishrin*, September 23, 1999.
31. *Tishrin*, June 7, 1999; *al-Ba'th*, July 5, 1999.
32. *Tishrin*, September 23, 1999; *al-Safir*, September 29, 1999.
33. See Reuters, March 16, 19, 1999.
34. *Syria Times*, March 27, 1999.
35. See *al-Thawra*, April 22, 1999. See also The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report—Syria—1999*, no. 4.
36. See *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, July 2, 1999; see also Eyal Zisser, "Syria," in *MECS XXII*.
37. *Tishrin*, March 13, 1999.
38. AFP, March 11, 1999; AFP, August 17, 1999; Reuters, January 6, 1999. See also *al-Ba'th*, March 2, 1999.
39. *Middle East Economic Digest (MEED)*, July 16, 1999.
40. See *al-Ba'th*, December 24, 1998.