



# PICSim | 2006

The Middle East '06

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## Syrian Arab Republic

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the 2006 Princeton International Crisis Simulation (PICSIM) and the Syrian Arab Republic. My name is Theo Ellis and I am a sophomore economics major. My interests include political theory, economic development in the third world and constitutional law. I will be chairing the Syrian Arab Republic committee with the help of director Eleni Azarias. Eleni is also a sophomore. According to her *Facebook* profile, her interests include mangoes, Vegemite and Egyptian ratscrew.

In a college IR-conference galaxy filled with a billion dim lights, PICSIM is a shooting star. At PICSIM there are no static topics. The delegates write the script of the conference. A highly-trained and energetic crisis staff reacts continuously to the decisions of each committee. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of PICSIM is that the conference allows all of its committees to interact with one another.

Syria will be a dynamic and engaging committee. Our neighbors include Lebanon to the west, Israel to the southwest, Jordan to the south, Iraq to the east, and Turkey to the north. We will be in the midst of an ever changing Middle East landscape. I hope you are excited.

Good luck preparing and I look forward to meeting all of you in March.



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*Director, Syrian Arab Republic*

**Princeton Interactive Crisis Simulation 2006**



## *Committee Positions*

**Bashar al-Assad** – Chair

**Mahar Assad** – Brother, Presidential Guard

**Assef Shawqat** – Brother-in-Law, Military Intelligence

**Farouq al-Shara** – Vice President

**Ali Habib** – Armed Forces Chief of Staff

**Hasan al-Turkumani** – Defense Minister

**Walid al Moulem** – Foreign Minister

**Mohammed Najj al-Otari** – Prime Minister

**Bahjaf Suleian** – Internal Intelligence

**Bassam Abdul Majid** – Interior Minister

**Dr Mohammed Iyad al Shatti** – Health Minister

**Dr Muhammed al-Hussein** – Finance Minister

**Adel Safar** – Agriculture Minister

**Rustum Ghazali** – Minister of Communications

## *Introduction*

The Syrian Arab Republic (Arabic: *ةيروسلا ةيبرعلا ةيرومجالا*), or Syria (Arabic: *ايروس*), is a country in the Middle East. It borders Lebanon to the west, Israel to the southwest, Jordan to the south, Iraq to the east, and Turkey to the north. Israel occupies the Golan Heights in the southwest of the country; a dispute with Turkey over the Hatay Province now seems to have subsided. Historically, Syria has often been taken to include the territories of Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and parts of Jordan, but excluding the Jazira region in the north-east of the modern Syrian state. In this historic sense, the region is also known as Greater Syria or by the Arabic name Bilad al-Sham.

## *History*

Damascus, a city that has been inhabited as early as 8,000 to 10,000 BC is known to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world (along with Varanasi, Aleppo and Jericho).



It came under Muslim rule in A.D. 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 the borders of Central Asia from A.D. 661 to A.D. 750, when the Abbasid caliphate was established at Baghdad, Iraq.

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.

Ottoman control ended when the forces of the Arab revolt entered Damascus in 1918 towards the end of the First World War. 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 in July 1920 when French forces entered Syria to impose their League of Nations mandate. Following the Battle of Maysalun of 23 July between the Syrian army under Yusuf al-Azmeh and the French, the French army entered Damascus and Faisal was exiled. The period of the Mandate was marked by increasing nationalist sentiment and a number of brutally repressed revolts, but also by infrastructural modernisation and economic development.

With the fall of France in 1940, Syria came under the control of the Vichy Government until the United Kingdom 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, Syrian politics from independence through the late 1960s was marked by upheaval. Between 1946 and 1956, Syria had 20 different cabinets and drafted four separate constitutions. In 1948, Syria was involved in the Arab-Israeli War. The Syrian army was pressed out of the Israel area, but fortified their strongholds on the Golan Heights and managed to keep their old borders. 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.

During the Suez Crisis of 1956, after the invasion of the Sinai Peninsula by Israeli troops, and the intervention of British and French troops, martial law was declared in Syria. Later Syrian and Iraqi troops were brought into Jordan to prevent a possible Israeli invasion. The November 1956 attacks on Iraqi pipelines were in retaliation for Iraq's acceptance into the Baghdad Pact. In early 1957 Iraq advised Egypt and Syria against a conceivable takeover of Jordan.

In November 1956 Syria signed a pact with the Soviet Union, providing a foothold for Communist influence within the government in exchange for planes, tanks, and other military equipment being sent to Syria. With this increase in the strength of Syrian military technology worried Turkey, as it seemed feasible that Syria might attempt to retake Iskenderon, a formerly Syrian city now in Turkey. On the other hand, Syria and the U.S.S.R. accused Turkey of massing



its troops at the Syrian border. During this standoff, Communists gained more control over the Syrian government and military. Only heated debates in the United Nations (of which Syria was an original member) lessened the threat of war.

Syria's political instability during the years after the 1954 coup, the parallelism of Syrian and Egyptian policies, and the appeal of Egyptian President Gamal Abdal Nasser's leadership in the wake of the Suez crisis created support in Syria for union with Egypt. On February 1, 1958, Syrian president Shukri al-Kuwatli and Nasser announced the merging of the two countries, creating the United Arab Republic, and all Syrian political parties, as well as the Communists therein, ceased overt activities.

The union was not a success, however. Following a military coup on September 28, 1961, Syria seceded, reestablishing itself as the Syrian Arab Republic. Instability characterised the next 18 months, with various coups culminating on March 8, 1963, in the installation by leftist Syrian Army officers of the National Council of the Revolutionary Command (NCRC), a group of military and civilian officials who assumed control of all executive and legislative authority. The takeover was engineered by members of the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party (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 Ba'ath takeover in Syria followed a Ba'ath coup in Iraq the previous month. The new Syrian Government explored the possibility of federation with Egypt and with 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 materialize. 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 organisations—labour, peasant, and professional unions—a presidential council, in which executive power was vested, and a cabinet. On February 23, 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 on March 1. The coup leaders described it as a "rectification" of Ba'ath Party principles. Israel invaded Syria in June 1967 war and captured and occupied the Golan Heights. This invasion 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 November 13, 1970, Minister of Defense Hafiz al-Asad effected a bloodless military coup, ousting the civilian party leadership and assuming the role of prime minister.

Upon assuming power, Hafiz al-Asad moved quickly to create an organizational infrastructure for his government and to consolidate control. The Provisional Regional Command of Asad'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 Asad. In the same month, a national referendum was held to confirm Asad as President for a 7-year term. In March 1972, to broaden the base of his government, Asad 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.

On October 6 1973, Syria and Egypt began the Yom Kippur War by staging a surprise attack against Israel (Arabs call it the "Ramadan War" or "October War" because Syria and Egypt attacked during Ramadan in the month of October). But despite the element of surprise, Egypt and Syria lost the war, and Israel continued to occupy the Golan Heights as part of the Israeli-occupied territories. In early 1976, the Lebanese civil war was going poorly for the Maronite Christians. Syria sent 40,000 troops into the country to prevent them from being overrun, but soon became embroiled in the Lebanese Civil War, beginning the 30 year Syrian presence in Lebanon. Over the following 15 years of civil war, Syria fought both for control over Lebanon, and as an attempt to undermine Israel in southern Lebanon, through extensive use of Lebanese allies as proxy fighters. Many see the Syrian Army's presence in Lebanon as an occupation, especially following the end of the civil war in 1990, after the Syrian-sponsored Taif Agreement. Syria then remained in Lebanon until 2005, exerting a heavy-handed influence over Lebanese politics, that was deeply resented by many.

About one million Syrian workers came into Lebanon after the war ended to find jobs in the reconstruction of the country. Syrian workers were preferred over Palestinian and Lebanese workers because they could be paid lower wages, but some have argued that the Syrian government's encouragement of citizens entering its small and militarily dominated neighbour in search of work, was in fact an attempt at Syrian colonization of Lebanon. Now, the economies of Syria and Lebanon are completely interdependent. In 1994, under pressure from Damascus, the Lebanese government controversially granted citizenship to over 200,000 Syrians resident in the country. (For more on these issues, see Demographics of Lebanon)

The authoritarian regime was not without its critics, though most were quickly murdered. A serious challenge arose in the late 1970s, however, from fundamentalist Sunni Muslims, who reject 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 U.S.-led multinational coalition aligned against Saddam Hussein marked a dramatic watershed in Syria's relations both with other Arab states and with the Western world. 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-Asad's meeting with then President Bill Clinton in Geneva in March 2000.

Hafiz Al-Asad died on June 10, 2000, after 30 years in power. Immediately following Al-Asad's death, the Parliament amended the constitution, reducing the mandatory minimum age of the President from 40 to 34 years old, which allowed his son, Bashar Al-Asad legally to be eligible for nomination by the ruling Ba'ath party. On July 10, 2000, Bashar Al-Asad was elected President by referendum in which he ran unopposed, garnering 97.29% of the vote, according to Syrian government statistics.

In his inauguration speech delivered at the People's Council on July 17, 2000, Bashar Al-Assad promised political and democratic reform. Human rights activists and other civil society advocates, as well as some parliamentarians, became more outspoken during a period referred to as "Damascus Spring" (July 2000-February 2001). Enthusiasm faded quickly as the government cracked down on civil forums and reform activists, but there was still a notable liberalization compared to the totalitarianism of Hafez. The lifting of bans on Internet access, mobile telephones and the spread of computer technology has had a great impact on the previously isolated Syrian society, and the secret police's presence in society has been eased. Today there exists a small but growing number of dissident intellectuals, as well as several formally illegal opposition parties. However, government power rests firmly in the hands of the Ba'ath, and police surveillance and occasional crackdowns keeps opposition activities limited.

## *Government*

Officially, Syria is a parliamentary republic. Critics allege, however, it is an authoritarian regime that exhibits only the forms of a democratic system. Although citizens ostensibly vote for the President and members of Parliament, they do not have the right to change their government. The late President Hafez al-Assad was confirmed by unopposed referenda five times. His son, Bashar al-Assad, also was confirmed by an unopposed referendum in July 2000.

All three branches of government are guided by the views of the Ba'ath Party, whose primacy in state institutions is assured by the constitution. In addition, six other political parties are permitted to exist and, along with the Ba'ath Party, make up the National Progressive Front (NPF), a grouping of parties that represents the sole framework of legal political party participation for citizens. While created ostensibly to give the appearance of a multi-party system, the NPF is dominated by the Ba'ath Party and does not change the essentially one-party character of the political system. The Ba'ath Party dominates the Parliament, which is known as the People's Council (majlis ash-sha'b). Elected every four years, the Council has no independent authority. Although parliamentarians may criticize policies and modify draft laws, they cannot initiate laws, and the executive branch retains ultimate control over the legislative process. It essentially functions as a rubber-stamp for the executive authority.

The Syrian constitution of 1973 requires that the president be Muslim but does not make Islam the state religion. Islamic jurisprudence, however, is required to be the main source of legislation. The judicial system in Syria is an amalgam of Ottoman, French, and Islamic laws, with three levels of courts: courts of first instance, courts of appeals, and the constitutional court, the highest tribunal. In addition, religious courts handle questions of personal and family law.



Syria has fourteen governorates, or muhafazat (singular: muhafazah). A governor, whose appointment is proposed by the minister of the interior, approved by the cabinet, and announced by executive decree, heads each governorate. The governor is assisted by an elected provincial council. Note that parts of the Quneitra governorate is under Israeli occupation since 1967 (see Golan Heights).

### *Ba'ath Party*

The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party (also spelled Baath or Ba'th; Arabic: *يبرعلا ثعبلأ بزح* (يكرارشالآ)) was founded in 1945 as a radical, secular Arab nationalist political party. It functioned as a pan-Arab party with branches in different Arab countries, but was strongest in Syria and Iraq, coming to power in both countries in 1963. In 1966 the Syrian and Iraqi parties split into two rival organisations. Both Ba'ath parties retained the same name and maintain parallel structures in the Arab world.

The Syrian Ba'ath and the Iraqi Ba'ath are now two separate parties, each maintaining that it was the genuine party and electing a National Command to take charge of the party across the Arab world. However, in Syria the Regional Command was the real centre of party power, with the president of Syria as Regional Secretary. The membership of the National Command was a largely honorary position, often the destination of figures being eased out of the leadership.

The Ba'ath holds 135 of the 250 seats in the Syrian parliament, a figure which is dictated by election regulations rather than by voting patterns.

The Arabic word Ba'ath means "resurrection" or "renaissance" as in the party's founder Michel Aflaq's published works "On The Way Of Resurrection". Ba'athist beliefs combine Arab Socialism, nationalism, and Pan-Arabism. The mostly secular ideology often contrasts with that of other Arab governments in the Middle East, which sometimes tend to have leanings towards Islamism and theocracy.

The motto of the Party is "Unity, Freedom, Socialism" (in Arabic *wahda, hurriya, ishtirakiya*). "Unity" refers to Arab unity, "freedom" emphasizes freedom from foreign control and interference in particular, and "socialism" refers to what has been termed Arab Socialism rather than to Marxism.

### *Military*

The President of Syria is commander in chief of the Syrian armed forces, comprising some 320,000 troops upon mobilization. The military is a conscripted force; males serve 24 months in the military upon reaching the age of 18. About 14,000 Syrian soldiers were deployed in Lebanon until April 27, 2005, when the last of Syria's troops left the country after three decades.

The breakup of the Soviet Union — long the principal source of training, material, and credit for the Syrian forces — may have slowed Syria's ability to acquire modern military equipment. It is one of the most advanced of the Arab countries in developing non-conventional weapons,



maintaining a chemical and biological stockpile. According to Eyal Zisser of Tel Aviv University, Syria has concentrated on the development of Sarin and VX gas, and has weaponized the gases with the development of chemical warheads. It also has an arsenal of advanced surface-to-surface missiles, capable of reaching most of the populated areas of Israel, Syria's longstanding enemy in the region. In the early 1990s, Scud-C missiles with a 500-kilometer range were procured from North Korea, and Scud-D, with a range of up to 700 kilometers, is being developed by Syria with the help of North Korea and Iran, according to Zisser.

Syria received significant financial aid from Gulf Arab states as a result of its participation in the Gulf War, with a sizable portion of these funds earmarked for military spending. In addition, Syria is trying to develop defensive weapons to limit the Israeli abilities to attack it.

Military branches: Syrian Arab Army, Syrian Arab Navy, Syrian Arab Air Force, Syrian Arab Air Defense Forces, Police and Security Force

### *Intelligence Agencies*

Since independence, Syria's police and internal security apparatus have undergone repeated reorganization and personnel changes, reflecting the security demands of each succeeding regime. During the relative political stability of the 1970s and 1980s, police and security services were credited with having grown and become professional, but in 1987 only the bare outlines of their institutional makeup were known.

The largest intelligence-gathering and internal security organization was the National Security Directorate, employing about 25,000 personnel. Other security organizations were under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior. These organizations included a national police force, responsible for routine police duties. It incorporated the 8,000-man Gendarmerie, which had originally been organized by the French Mandate authorities to police rural areas. During the 1960s, the civil police forces were believed to have been used extensively to combat internal security threats to the government, but during the 1970s and 1980s these forces assumed a more conventional civil police role; this change in role coincided with increased professionalization and the parallel development of an effective and pervasive internal security apparatus.

Nevertheless, the police continued to receive training in such functions as crowd and riot control. In the 1980s the internal security apparatus consisted of myriad organizations with overlapping missions to gather intelligence concerning internal security and to engage in activities (largely covert) to apprehend and neutralize opponents of the regime. According to Amnesty International, there were several security force networks in Syria. Each had its own branches, detention cells, and interrogation centers, located throughout the country, and each also had its own intelligence service. Each organization was directly responsible to the president and his closest advisers. The organizations operated independently with no clear boundaries to their areas of jurisdiction and no coordination among them. For example, although the civilian security police dealt with internal security matters, the responsibilities of Military Intelligence headed by General Ali Duba were not limited to matters affecting the armed forces, but also included internal security. In the mid-1980s, Western sources reported that the power and pervasiveness of Syria's internal security apparatus inspired fear among the Syrian population.





## *Economy*

Syria is a middle-income, developing country with a diversified economy based on agriculture, industry, and energy. During the 1960s, citing its state socialist ideology, the government nationalized most major enterprises and adopted economic policies designed to address regional and class disparities. This legacy of state intervention and price, trade, and foreign exchange controls still hampers economic growth, although the government has begun to revisit many of these policies, especially in the financial sector and the country's trade regime. Despite a number of significant reforms and ambitious development projects of the early 1990s, as well as more modest reform efforts currently underway, Syria's economy still is slowed by large numbers of poorly performing public sector firms, low investment levels, and relatively low industrial and agricultural productivity.

Despite the mitigation of the severe drought that plagued the region in the late 1990s and the recovery of energy export revenues, Syria's economy faces serious challenges. With almost 60% of its population under the age of 20, unemployment higher than the current estimated range of 20%-25% is a real possibility unless sustained and strong economic growth takes off. Oil production has levelled off, but recent agreements allowing increased foreign investment in the petroleum sector may boost production in two to three years.

Taken as a whole, Syrian economic reform thus far has been incremental and gradual, with privatization not even on the distant horizon. The government, however, has begun to address structural deficiencies in the economy such as the lack of a modern financial sector through changes to the legal and regulatory environment. In 2001, Syria legalized private banking. In 2004, four private banks began operations. In August 2004, a committee was formed to supervise the establishment of a stock market. Beyond the financial sector, the Syrian Government has enacted major changes to rental and tax laws, and is reportedly considering similar changes to the commercial code and to other laws, which impact property rights.

Commerce has always been important to the Syrian economy, which benefited from the country's location along major east-west trade routes. Syrian cities boast both traditional industries such as weaving and dried-fruit packing and modern heavy industry. Given the policies adopted from the 1960s through the late 1980s, Syria failed to join an increasingly interconnected global economy. In late 2001, however, Syria submitted a request to the World Trade Organization to begin the accession process. Syria had been an original contracting party of the former General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade but withdrew in 1951 because of Israel's joining. Major elements of current Syrian trade rules would have to change in order to be consistent with the WTO. Syria is intent on signing an Association Agreement with the European Union that would entail significant trade liberalization.

The bulk of Syrian imports have been raw materials essential for industry, agriculture, equipment, and machinery. Major exports include crude oil, refined products, raw cotton, clothing, fruits, and cereal grains. Earnings from oil exports are one of the government's most important sources of foreign exchange.



Of Syria's 72,000 square miles (186,000 km<sup>2</sup>), roughly one-third is arable, with 80% of cultivated areas dependent on rainfall for water. In recent years, the agriculture sector has recovered from years of government inattentiveness and drought. Most farms are privately owned, but the government controls important elements of marketing and transportation.

The government has redirected its economic development priorities from industrial expansion into the agricultural sectors in order to achieve food self-sufficiency, enhance export earnings, and stem rural migration. Thanks to sustained capital investment, infrastructure development, subsidies of inputs, and price supports, Syria has gone from a net importer of many agricultural products to an exporter of cotton, fruits, vegetables, and other foodstuffs. One of the prime reasons for this turnaround has been the government's investment in huge irrigation systems in northern and northeastern Syria, part of a plan to increase irrigated farmland by 38% over the next decade.

Syria has produced heavy-grade oil from fields located in the northeast since the late 1960s. In the early 1980s, light-grade, low-sulphur oil was discovered near Dayr az Zawr in eastern Syria. This discovery relieved Syria of the need to import light oil to mix with domestic heavy crude in refineries. Recently, Syrian oil production has been about 530,000 barrels per day. Although its oil reserves are small compared to those of many other Arab states, Syria's petroleum industry accounts for a majority of the country's export income. The government has successfully begun to work with international energy companies to develop Syria's promising natural gas reserves, both for domestic use and export. U.S. energy firm, ConocoPhillips, completed a large natural gas gathering and production facility for Syria in late 2000, and will continue to serve as operator of the plant until December 2005. In 2003, Syria experienced some success in attracting U.S. Petroleum companies, signing an exploration deal with partners Devon Energy and Gulfsands and a seismic survey contract with Veritas.

Ad hoc economic liberalization continues to provide hope to Syria's private sector. In 1990, the government established an official parallel exchange rate (neighboring country rate) to provide incentives for remittances and exports through official channels. This action improved the supply of basic commodities and contained inflation by removing risk premiums on smuggled commodities.

Over time, the government has increased the number of transactions to which the more favorable neighboring country exchange rate applies. The government also introduced a quasi-rate for non-commercial transactions in 2001 broadly in line with prevailing black market rates. Exchange-rate unification remains an elusive goal as pressure is building for Syria to harmonize its exchange rate system.

Given the poor development of its own capital markets and Syria's lack of access to international money and capital markets, monetary policy remains captive to the need to cover the fiscal deficit. Although in 2003 Syria lowered interest rates for the first time in 22 years and again in 2004, rates remain fixed by law. In a positive move in 2003, Syria canceled an old and troublesome law governing foreign currency exchange; however, new regulations have yet to be implemented. Some basic commodities continue to be heavily subsidized, and social services are provided for nominal charges.



Syria has made progress in easing its heavy foreign debt burden through bilateral rescheduling deals with virtually all of its key creditors in Europe. In May 2005, Russia and Syria signed a deal that wrote off nearly three-quarters of Syria's debt to Russia, approximately €10.5 billion (\$13 billion). The agreement left Syria with less than €3 billion (just over \$3.6 billion) owed to Moscow. Half of it would be repaid over the next 10 years, while the rest would be paid into Russian accounts in Syrian banks and could be used for Russian investment projects in Syria and for buying Syrian products.

## *Demographics*

**Population:** 18,448,752

**Age structure:**

*0-14 years:* 37.4% (male 3,556,795; female 3,350,799)

*15-64 years:* 59.3% (male 5,601,971; female 5,333,022)

*65 years and over:* 3.3% (male 288,868; female 317,052) (2005 est.)

**Population growth rate:** 2.34% (2005 est.)

**Birth rate:** 28.29 births/1,000 population (2005 est.)

**Death rate:** 4.88 deaths/1,000 population (2005 est.)

**Net migration rate:** 0 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2005 est.)

**Sex ratio:**

*at birth:* 1.06 male(s)/female

*under 15 years:* 1.06 male(s)/female

*15-64 years:* 1.05 male(s)/female

*65 years and over:* 0.91 male(s)/female

*total population:* 1.05 male(s)/female (2005 est.)

**Infant mortality rate:** 29.53 deaths/1,000 live births (2005 est.)

**Life expectancy at birth:**

*total population:* 70.03 years

*male:* 68.75 years

*female:* 71.38 years (2005 est.)

**Total fertility rate:** 3.5 children born/woman (2005 est.)

**Nationality:**

*noun:* Syrian(s)

*adjective:* Syrian



**Ethnic groups:** Syrian Arabs 85%, Kurds 9%, Fatimid 8%, Aramean (Jacobite: Syrian Orthodox and Syrian Catholic) 5%, Armenians and other 2%

**Religions:** Sunni Muslim 74%, Alawite, Druze, and other Muslim sects 16%, Christian (various sects) 10%, Jewish (tiny communities in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo)

**Languages:** Arabic (official); Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, [Circassian](#) widely understood; French, English somewhat understood

**Literacy:**

*definition:* age 15 and over can read and write

*total population:* 76.9%

*male:* 89.7%

*female:* 64% (2003 est.)

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 sq. mi (54/km<sup>2</sup>).

Ethnic Syrians are an overall Semitic Levantine people. While modern-day Syrians are commonly ascribed to as Arabs — by virtue of their modern-day language and intrinsic bonds to Arab culture and history — they are in fact a blend of the various ancient Semitic groups indigenous to the region who in turn admixed with later arriving Arabs. There is also a smaller degree of admixture from non-Semitic peoples that have occupied the region over time.

Syria's population is 90% Muslim and 10% Christian. Among Muslims, 78% are Sunni and the remaining 22% is divided among other Muslim groups, including the Alawi, Shi'a, and Druze. There also is a tiny Syrian Jewish community that is confined mainly to Damascus, Aleppo and al-Kamishli.

Arabs (including some 400,000 Palestinian refugees) make up 90% of the population. The Kurds, an Indo-European people, constitute the largest ethnic minority, making up 10% of the population. Most Kurds reside in the northeast corner of Syria and many still speak the Kurdish language. Sizable Kurdish communities live in most major Syrian cities as well. The Syriac Christians are also a notable minority that live in north and northeast Syria.

Arabic is the official and most widely spoken language. Many educated Syrians also speak English or French, but English is more widely understood.

## *Foreign Relations*

Ensuring national security, increasing influence among its Arab neighbors, and achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement, which includes the return of the Golan Heights, are the primary goals of President Bashar al-Assad's foreign policy.

Israel



Al-Assad's foreign policy was shaped by the relation of Syria to Israel, although this conflict both preceded him and persists after his death. During his presidency, Syria played a major role in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The war is, despite heavy losses and Israeli advances, presented by the Syrian government as a victory, as Syria regained some territory that had been occupied in 1967 through peace negotiations, headed by Henry Kissinger. Since then Assad-led Syria has carefully respected the UN-monitored cease-fire line in the occupied Golan Heights, instead using non-Syrian clients such as the Hizbullah and various Palestinian extremist groups to exert pressure on Israel. Syria denied Israel any recognition, and long preferred to refer to it as a "Zionist Entity". Only in the mid-1990s did Hafez moderate his country's policy towards Israel, as he realized the loss of Soviet support meant a different regional power balance. Pressed by the USA, he engaged in negotiations on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, but these talks ultimately failed.

On October 5, 2003, Israel bombed a site near Damascus, claiming it was a terrorist training facility for members of Islamic Jihad. The raid was in retaliation for the bombing of a restaurant in the Israeli town of Haifa that killed 19. Islamic Jihad said the camp was not in use; Syria said the attack was on a civilian area.

The Israeli action was widely condemned. The German Chancellor said it "cannot be accepted" and the French Foreign Ministry said "The Israeli operation... constituted an unacceptable violation of international law and sovereignty rules." The Spanish UN Ambassador Inocencio Arias called it an attack of "extreme gravity" and "a clear violation of international law." However, the United States moved closer to slapping sanctions on Syria, following the adoption of the Syria Accountability Act by the House of Representatives International Relations committee.

## Palestine

The hostile attitude to Israel meant vocal support for the Palestinians, but that did not translate into friendly relations with their organizations. Hafez al-Assad were always wary of independent Palestinian organizations, as he aimed to bring the Palestinian issue under Syrian control in order to use it as a political tool. He soon developed an implacable animosity to Yassir Arafats Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), with which Syria fought bloody battles in Lebanon.

As Arafat moved the PLO in a more moderate direction, seeking compromise with Israel, al-Assad also feared regional isolation, and he resented the PLO underground's operations in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria. Arafat was depicted by Syria as a rogue madman and an American marionette, and after accusing him of supporting the Hama revolt, al-Assad backed the 1983 Abu Musa rebellion inside Arafats Fatah-movement. A number of Syrian attempts to kill Arafat were also made, but with no success. In 1999, Al-Assad had his right-hand man, the trusted defence minister Mustafa Tlass, make an on-the-record statement labelling Arafat "the son of 60,000 whores and 60,000 dogs", in addition to comparing him to a strip-tease dancer and a black cat, calling him a coward and, finally, pointing out that the Palestinian leader was getting uglier.



An effective strategy was undermining Arafat through support for radical groups both outside and inside the PLO. This way, Syria secured some influence over PLO politics, and was also able to literally blow up any attempts at negotiation with the US and Israel through pushing for terrorist attacks. The PLO's As-Sa'iqa faction was and is completely controlled by Syria, and under Hafez, groups such as the PFLP-GC and others were also turned into clients. In later years, Syria focused on supporting non-PLO Islamist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

At the UN Security Council and in other multilateral fora, Syria has taken a leading role in espousing the view that Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist groups fighting Israel are not terrorists; it also has used its voice in the UN Security Council to encourage international support for Palestinian national aspirations and denounce Israeli actions in the Palestinian territories as “state terrorism.”

## Lebanon

Syria also deployed troops, ostensibly as a peacekeeping force, to Lebanon in 1976, in another of al-Assad's major foreign policy decisions. There it warred throughout the Lebanese Civil War to counter Israeli pressure in south Lebanon and secure Syrian primacy, and eventually turned into an occupation army. In 1991 the Syrians crushed the last factions resisting their rule, after having struck an under-the-table deal with the US government, in exchange for participating in the Gulf war. On US recommendations, Israel withdrew its air cover for the Lebanese military government of Michel Aoun, and after a ravaging air bombardment, Syrian forces poured into Beirut and the presidential palace. Al-Assad promptly set about writing treaties of "cooperation and friendship" with a puppet Lebanese government, which secured his Syria's indefinite domination of the country.

As a sort of provincial governor of Lebanon, al-Assad installed security strongman Ghazi Kanaan, who ruled from the Beqaa valley. From its bases in the Beqaa, Syria armed and used Palestinian and, most importantly, the Shia Muslim Hizbullah guerrillas as proxies in its war against Israel's occupation of south Lebanon. In 2000, Israel withdrew, and Syria then extended its control to the border, using Hizbullah.

On February 14, 2005, Rafik Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, was killed by a car bomb. Many members of the Lebanese opposition and international observers alleged that Hariri was assassinated by Syria. Popular protests soon arose, composed primarily of Christians, Druze and Sunni Muslims, demanding the resignation of the government led by Omar Karami, as well as the withdrawal of all Syrian troops and intelligence operatives. On February 28, 2005, Karami's government resigned, although he was reappointed a few days later. On March 5, 2005, after intense international pressure, president Bashar al-Assad of Syria made a speech before the Syrian Parliament, where he announced that Syria would complete a full withdrawal from Lebanon by May of 2005.

Syria withdrew from Lebanon on April 26, 2005. After two UN investigations (the FitzGerald Report and the Mehlis report) implicated Syrian officials in the Hariri slaying, the Assad regime entered a turbulent period, the seriousness of the crisis signalled by the death of interior minister Ghazi Kanaan, as well as Western threats of economic sanctions.



However, in December 2005 the UN's case against Syria came under serious scrutiny as questions were raised about the credibility of several of the main witnesses of the Mehlis investigation. These events also prompted a debate on Syrian witness intimidation, in preparation for the final report of Mehlis, whose mandate expired on December 15, 2005. He was replaced by Serge Brammertz, a former Belgian federal prosecutor and currently the deputy prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.

## U.S.A.

U.S.-Syrian relations, severed in 1967, were resumed in June 1974, following the achievement of the Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement. In 1990-91, Syria cooperated with the U.S. as a member of the multinational coalition of forces in the Gulf War. The U.S. and Syria also consulted closely on the Taif Accord, ending the civil war in Lebanon. In 1991, President Asad made a historic decision to accept then President Bush's invitation to attend a Middle East peace conference and to engage in subsequent bilateral negotiations with Israel. Syria's efforts to secure the release of Western hostages held in Lebanon and its lifting of restrictions on travel by Syrian Jews helped further to improve relations between Syria and the United States. There were several presidential summits; the last one occurred when then-President Clinton met the late President Hafiz al-Asad in Geneva in March 2000.

Syria has been on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism since the list's inception in 1979. Because of its continuing support and safe haven for terrorist organizations, Syria is subject to legislatively mandated penalties, including export sanctions and ineligibility to receive most forms of U.S. aid or to purchase U.S. military equipment. In 1986, the U.S. withdrew its ambassador and imposed additional administrative sanctions on Syria in response to evidence of direct Syrian involvement in an attempt to blow up an Israeli airplane. A U.S. ambassador returned to Damascus in 1987, partially in response to positive Syrian actions against terrorism such as expelling the Abu Nidal Organization from Syria and helping free an American hostage earlier that year.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Syrian government began limited cooperation with U.S. in the global war against terrorism. However, Syria opposed the Iraq war in March 2003, and bilateral relations with the U.S. swiftly deteriorated. In December 2003, President George W. Bush signed into law the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, which provided for the imposition of a series of sanctions against Syria if Syria did not end its support for Palestinian terrorist groups, end its military and security presence in Lebanon, cease its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and meet its obligations under US interpretation of United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq. In May 2004, the President determined that Syria had not met these conditions and implemented sanctions that prohibit the export to Syria of items on the U.S. Munitions List and Commerce Control List, the export to Syria of U.S. products except for food and medicine, and the taking off from or landing in the United States of Syrian government-owned aircraft. At the same time, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced its intention to order U.S. financial institutions to sever correspondent accounts with the Commercial Bank of Syria based on money-laundering concerns, pursuant to Section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act.



Acting under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), the President also authorized the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Secretary of State, to freeze assets belonging to certain Syrian individuals and government entities.

However, relations since the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri have considerably deteriorated. Issues of U.S. concern include the Syrian Government's failure to prevent Syria from becoming a major transit point for foreign fighters entering Iraq, its refusal to deport from Syria former Saddam regime elements who are supporting the insurgency in Iraq, its ongoing interference in Lebanese affairs, its protection of the leadership of Palestinian rejectionist groups in Damascus, its deplorable human rights record, and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. In May 2004, the Bush administration, pursuant to the provisions of the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, imposed sanctions on Syria. In February 2005, in the wake of the Hariri assassination, the U.S. recalled its Ambassador to Washington for consultations. (As of fall 2005, the Ambassador has not returned to Damascus)

## EU

The European Union uses a method to bring about change in Syria that can be likened to soft power, using neither military nor economic force. Now that there is a good chance that Turkey will join the EU, Syria would border the EU. At present it can not join as a full member, but economic treaties are possible. However, for these, the EU has certain requirements, which would necessitate changes to take place, most notably in the fields of democracy and human rights. At the moment there are negotiations on an Association Agreement, which would liberalize mutual trade. Syria is required to make certain political and economic reforms in order for this process to come into effect.

## *Al-Assad Family*

### **Bashar al-Assad**

Assad speaks fluent English and French, having studied at the Franco-Arab al-Hurriyet elite school in Damascus (the Syrian capital), before going on to medical school there at the University of Damascus Faculty of Medicine. He then went on to get a subspecialty training in the field of ophthalmology in London's academic hospitals. He is married to Asma' al-Akhras, a Syrian Sunni Muslim whom he met in Great Britain.

The al-Assad family are members of the minority Muslim Alawite group, and members of that group have been prominent in the governmental hierarchy and army since 1963 when Baath first seized power. Their origins are to be found in the Latakia region of north-west Syria. Bashar's family is originally from Qardaha, just east of Latakia.

Initially Bashar had few political aspirations. Hafez al-Assad had been grooming Bashar's older brother, Basil al-Assad to be the future president. However, Basil's premature death in an automobile accident in 1994 suddenly made Bashar his father's new heir apparent. When the elder Assad died in 2000, Bashar was duly elected President unopposed with apparent massive





popular support, after Syria's Majlis Al Shaa'b (Parliament) swiftly voted to lower the minimum age for candidates from 40 to 34.

Upon claiming the presidency, Bashar al-Assad promised economic and political reforms to Syria, but he has so far delivered little change in the status quo. The Baath Party remains in control of the parliament and is constitutionally the "leading party" of the state. Bashar al-Assad, however, was not strongly involved previously in the running of the party. Until he became President, Bashar's only formal political role was as the head of the Syrian Computer Society, which was mainly in charge of introducing the Internet to Syria.

Immediately after he took power, a reform movement made cautious advances during the so-called Damascus Spring, and Assad seemed to accept this, as he shut down the notorious Mezze prison and released hundreds of political prisoners. The Damascus Spring however ground to an abrupt halt as security crackdowns commenced again within a year, and although Bashar rules with a softer touch than the all-out totalitarianism of his father, political freedoms are still extremely curtailed. The security apparatus has eased its grip on society, but remains solidly in control, and while a small dissident movement has by now firmly established itself, it is still both powerless and pressured by the regime. Sporadic protests are occurring among the Kurds in north-eastern Syria, long discriminated against by the Arab nationalist Baathist government.

Economic liberalization has also been very limited, with industry still heavily state-controlled and corruption rife throughout the state apparatus. Mild economic sanctions (the Syria Accountability Act) applied by the USA further complicate the situation. Of major importance are the negotiations for a free trade Association Agreement with the European Union, but progress is slow.

The military plays an omnipresent role in Syrian politics - Hafez al-Assad headed both the military and the air forces, and it was a military coup which brought him to power in 1970. Bashar entered the military academy at Homs, north of Damascus, following the death of Basil, and was propelled through the ranks to become a colonel in January 1999.

According to some sources, at least part of the slow progress on reform stems from the opposition of an "old guard" within the Syrian regime, which drags its feet in protest of political liberalizations and in order to maintain its privileged position within the government. There has even been speculation on whether Bashar al-Assad was in real control of Syria, with some commentators suggesting the country was run by a coterie of old Hafez loyalists, mainly around the military and security services, with Bashar acting mainly as a figurehead. Others have claimed that he has indeed always been in power, but that he has acted cautiously so as not to provoke powerful elements within the old elite, as was initially lacking a support base within the government. This seems to be a widely held opinion among Syrians, some of whom credit the president with good intentions but little effective power to carry out his reform program.

While Bashar certainly seems to have been careful in pushing for reforms of the government, he has systematically expanded his influence within the Syrian ruling apparatus. The retirement of the powerful defence minister Mustafa Tlass in 2004 and vice president Abdulhalim Khaddam in 2005, both long-standing Hafez loyalists, is considered a sign that Bashar's "soft purge" of the



party is now more or less over. This, however, also means Assad can to a greater extent be held personally responsible for the slow pace of reform.

### **Rifaat al-Assad**

Rifaat al-Assad is the younger brother of the former President of Syria, Hafiz al-Assad, and the uncle of the current President Bashar al-Assad, all of whom come from the minority Alawite Muslim sect. He was born in the village of Qardaha, near Lattakia in western Syria.

#### Under Hafiz' rule

He played a key role in his brother's takeover of executive power in 1970, dubbed The Corrective Revolution, and ran the elite internal security forces and the 'Defence Company' (Saraya al-Difaa). He had a pivotal role throughout the 1970s and many saw him as the likely successor to Hafiz up until 1984.

In February 1982 he commanded the forces that put down a Muslim Brotherhood Sunni Islamist revolt in the central city of Hama, by instructing his forces to shell the city, killing possibly 20,000 of its inhabitants. This became known as the Hama Massacre. The American journalist Thomas Friedman claims in his book *From Beirut to Jerusalem* that Rifaat later bragged that the total number of victims was no less than 38,000.

#### Attempted coup d'état

When Hafez al-Assad suffered from a heart attack in 1983, he established a 6-member committee to run the country. At the same time, Rifaat's troops, now numbering more than 55,000 with tanks, artillery, aircraft and helicopters, began asserting control over Damascus. Tensions between forces loyal to Hafiz and those loyal to Rifaat were extreme, but in the end Hafiz ended the attempted coup by getting up from his sick bed and assuming full control, with the aid of Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass. Command of the 'Defence Company' was transferred to another officer, and Rifaat was sent abroad on "an open-ended working visit". Although he returned for his mother's funeral in 1992, he has remained in exile in France ever since. He nominally retained the post of vice president until 1998, when he was stripped even of this. This has not, however, prevented Rifaat, alongside his son Shawmar, from building up a large business empire both in Syria, and abroad. Period crackdowns on his supporters in Syria have continued: in 1999, for example, large numbers of Rifaat's supporters were arrested.

In France, Rifat has loudly protested the succession of Bashar al-Assad, Hafiz's son, to the post of president, claiming that he himself embodies the "only constitutional legality" (as vice president, alleging his dismissal was unconstitutional). He has made threatening remarks about planning to return to Syria at a time of his choosing to assume "his responsibilities and fulfill the will of the people", and that while he will rule benevolently and democratically, he will do so with "the power of the people and the army" behind him. To date, however, this has amounted to little more than threatening words.

#### Foreign support for Rifaat



Rifaat is reputed to have turned even to Israel asking for assistance (he was rebuffed), and he has also initiated contacts with exiled representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood. After the Iraq war, there were press reports that he had started talks with US government representatives on helping to form a coalition with other anti-Assad groups to provide an alternative Syrian leadership, on the model of the Iraqi National Congress. Rifaat has held a meeting with the former Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. Yossef Bodansky, the director of the US Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, has stated that Rifaat enjoys support from both America and Saudi Arabia. The Bashar regime remains wary of his intentions and carefully monitors his activities.

Rifat was mentioned by the influential American think tank STRATFOR as a possible suspect for the 2005 bombing that killed Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafiq Hariri and the string of attacks that has struck Beirut after the subsequent Syrian withdrawal. The goal would be to destabilize the Syrian regime. However, there was no mention of Rifaat in the United Nations Mehlis report on the crime.

### **Maher al-Assad**

Lt. Col. Maher al-Assad (b. 1968) is the brother of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

He is an Alawite muslim and as the youngest son of former president Hafez al-Assad, he was born only two years before his father assumed power. He studied business at Damascus University, but then chose a military career. After the death of his brother Basil al-Assad in a 1994 car accident, he was mentioned as a possible successor to Hafez, but in the end, Bashar was chosen.

Maher al-Assad is a member of the ruling Ba'th Party's central committee and is said to be a close advisor of Bashar. He is head of Syria's Presidential Guard. In October 1999, he is rumoured to have shot Gen. Assef Shawqat (who is married to his sister Bushra) in the stomach during a fight. Assef survived, and the two are said to have good relations.

Both Shawkat and Maher al-Assad were mentioned in a leaked draft version of the Mehlis report as suspects in the 2005 murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri.

### **Gen. Adnan Makhlouf**

General Adnan Makhlouf is a cousin of Bashar al-Assad's mother. Commands the Republican Guard.

### **Assef Shawqat**

Gen. Assef Shawqat (b. 1950) is the head of Syria's military intelligence.

Assef Shawqat studied history at Damascus University in the 1970s, and then joined the Syrian Army. In the mid-1980s he met Bushra al-Assad, daughter of president Hafez al-Assad. Their



relationship encountered opposition from within the ruling family, and her brother Basil had Assef jailed on several occasions. In 1995, Assef and Bushra married, and Hafez then chose to support their marriage.

After this, Shawkat Assef's star rose quickly within the ranks of the Syrian ruling elite, and he became a close adviser of his brother-in-law, president Bashar al-Assad, who had succeeded his father in the year 2000. In 2001, Assef was named Director of Syrian Military Intelligence, one of the main branches of the Syrian intelligence apparatus.

During a fight with Bushra's brother Maher in October 1999, head of Syria's Presidential Guard, Shawqat reportedly was shot in the stomach. He was taken to Paris for treatment, but after returning, he is reported to have had good relations with Maher.

In October 2005, Assef Shawqat, Maher and others were mentioned in a leaked draft version of the United Nations' Mehlis report as suspects in the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri. There is much speculation on how president Bashar al-Assad would deal with a request for extradition on such a close relative.

On January 18, 2006, the United States government announced that it had decided to freeze any assets belonging to Assef Shawqat in the US, and ban all United States nationals from having economic relations with him.

## **Other Notable Figures**

### **Mustafa Tlass**

Lt. Gen. Mustafa Tlass (b. 1932) is a Syrian politician, now retired.

#### Rise to power

Tlass was born in the Syrian village of al-Rastan near Homs to a Sunni muslim family. He joined the Ba'th Party at the age of 15, and met Hafez al-Assad when studying at the military academy in Homs. The two officers were both stationed in Cairo during the 1958-61 United Arab Republic merger between Syria and Egypt: while ardent Pan Arab nationalists hey both worked to break up the union, which they viewed as unfairly balanced in Egypt's favor. When al-Assad was briefly imprisoned by Nasser at the breakup of the union, Tlass fled and rescued his wife and sons to Syria.

During the 1960s al-Assad rose to prominence in the Syrian government through a 1963 coup d'état, backed by the Ba'th party. He then promoted Tlass (who had not been actively involved in the coup) to high-ranking military and party positions. A 1966 coup by an Alawite-dominated Ba'th faction further strengthened al-Assad, and by association Tlass. Tensions within the government soon became apparent, however, with al-Assad emerging as the prime proponent of a pragmatist, military-based faction opposed to the ideological radicalism of the dominant ultra-leftists. Syrian defeat in the 1967 Six Day War embarrassed the government, and in 1968 Assad



managed to install Tlass as new Chief-of-Staff. After the debacle of an attempted Syrian intervention in the Black September conflict, the power struggle came to open conflict.

Under cover of the 1970 "Corrective Revolution", al-Assad seized power and installed himself as President. Tlass was promoted to Minister of Defense in 1972, and became one of Assad's most trusted loyalists during the following 30 years of one-man rule in Syria. In 1984, Hafez al-Assad's brother Rifaat attempted to seize power, but Tlass stayed loyal to the President. Rifaat was subsequently sent into exile. Tlass was especially valuable to the President, since he was one of the few Sunnis to take part in what was essentially an Alawite government. While he himself embraced secularism, as did the rest of the Ba'th, he also in a way acted as a fig leaf to cover for the sectarian policies of al-Assad.

### Controversial statements

Tlass attempted to create a reputation for himself as a man of culture, and emerged as an important patron of Syrian literature. He published several books of his own, and started a publish company, Tlass Books, which has been criticized in the West for publishing anti-Semitic literature. In 1983, Tlass wrote and published *The Matzoh of Zion*, a book that intends to prove the ancient "blood libel" myth, i.e. accusations that Jews use the blood of murdered non-Jews in religious rituals such as baking Matza bread. Tlass has re-printed the book several times, and stands by its conclusions.

During his career, Tlass also became known for colorful language. In 1991, when Syria was participating on the American side in the Gulf War, Tlass stated that he felt "an overwhelming joy" when Saddam Hussein sent SCUD-missiles towards Israel. In 1999, Tlass caused a minor uproar in Arab political circles, when he denounced Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat as "the son of sixty thousand dogs and sixty thousand whores". Earlier, in 1986, he had called Arafat an "idiot" and a "puppet of the Americans". The long-standing conflict between the Assad regime and the Palestinian Liberation Organization would not end until after Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000.

### After Hafez

The succession of Bashar al-Assad, Hafez's son, seems to have been secured by Tlass (for a while, it was rumoured that Tlass himself had assumed the Presidency, but this was not true), and his influence increased sharply as he came to head the "old guard" within the regime, sometimes at odds with the unexperienced young President. Whether true or not, Tlass and his supporters were viewed by many as opponents of the discreet liberalization pursued by the younger al-Assad, and to maintain Syria's hardline foreign policy stances; but also as fighting for established privileges, having been heavily involved in government corruption. As Bashar al-Assad struggled to establish control over the powerful state apparatus and military, Tlass resigned or was forced to resign from all positions in both the Ba'th central committee and the government 2004.

**Muhammad Naji al-Otari** (born 1944) is the current prime minister of Syria. He has been Prime Minister since 10 September 2003. He is a Sunni member of the Baath party and



considered a strong administrator, but not a political animal. Experts say the prime minister post is a mostly technical position with little real influence.

## **Farouk al-Shara**

60, foreign minister. A former Hafez al-Assad loyalist and Sunni Muslim who rose through the Baath Party, Shara has held his post since 1984. Experts say Shara is not too involved in domestic policy but is still an influential figure. He is one of the few non-Alawites in Bashar's inner circle. He is accused of lying to UN investigators in the Mehlis report.

## **Ali Habib**

66, chief of staff of the armed forces. A lifelong military professional, Habib joined the Syrian army in 1959 at age twenty and graduated from the military academy in 1966. He steadily moved up the ranks, commanding a regiment from 1971-75, then an infantry brigade from 1978-84. He led Syria's military against Israeli forces invading Lebanon in 1982, headed an infantry division from 1984-94, and was commander of Syria's special forces from 1994-2002. He became a general in 1998 and served as deputy chief of staff from 2002 until 2004, when he was promoted to his current post.

**Abdul Halim Khaddam** (مادخ ميلحلا دب ع), born in 1932 in the city of Baniyas, northwest Syria, is a Syrian politician and former Vice President of Syria.

### Political career

One of the few Sunni Muslims to make it to the top of the Alawite-dominated Syrian leadership, Khaddam was long known as loyalist of Hafez al-Assad, and held a strong position within the regime. He was acting President of Syria from June 10 to July 17, 2000, between the death of Hafez and the election of his son, Bashar al-Assad, as the new President. At the time, there were rumours in Damascus that Khaddam would try to seize power.

As the new President strengthened his grip on the Ba'thist bureaucracy, Khaddam, and other members of the "old guard" of the regime, gradually lost influence. He announced his resignation on June 6, 2005, during the Ba'th Party Conference. That made him one of the last influential members of the "old guard" to leave the top tier of the regime, but the announcement came at a point when his political wings had already been clipped. After resigning, he relocated to Paris, France, ostensibly to write his memoirs.

### Official end of ties with regime

In an interview with Al Arabiya network from Paris, France, on December 30, 2005 Khaddam denounced Assad's many "political blunders" in dealing with Lebanon. He especially attacked Rustom Ghazali, former head of Syrian operations in Lebanon, and defended his predecessor Ghazi Kanaan - Syria's Interior Minister, who is believed to have committed suicide in October 2005. Khaddam also said that former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, to whom



Khaddam was considered close, "received many threats" from Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. The assassination of al-Hariri in February 2005 triggered the massive protests that eventually ended the 30-year long Syrian presence in Lebanon.

The Syrian parliament responded the next day by voting to bring treason charges against him, and the Baath Party expelled him. Following the Khaddam interview, the UN Commission headed by Detlev Mehlis investigating the al-Hariri murder said it had asked the Syrian authorities to question Bashar al-Assad and Syria's Foreign Minister Faruq al-Sharaa. According to the Lebanese Daily Star newspaper, the Commission has interviewed Khaddam on January 5, 2006.

On January 14 Khaddam announced that he was forming a 'government in exile', predicting the end of al-Assad's regime by the end of 2006. His accusations against al-Assad and his inner circle regarding the al-Hariri murder also grew more explicit: Khaddam said he believed that al-Assad ordered al-Hariri's assassination.

Khaddam is the highest ranking Syrian official to have publicly cut his ties with the authoritarian regime, with the possible exception of Rifaat al-Assad, brother of former President Hafez al-Assad, who was exiled in 1983, following an attempted coup d'état.

## Ghazi Kanaan

Ghazi Kanaan (1942 – 12 October 2005) (Arabic: *غياض كنعان*; transliterations vary) was Syria's Interior Minister from 2004 to 2005, and long-time head of Syria's security apparatus in Lebanon. His death during an investigation into the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri drew international attention.

### Background

Ghazi Kanaan was born in 1942 in Bhamra, near Qardaha, the home town of former Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad. This region, centered on the coastal town of Lattakia, is in heartland Syria's Alawite minority, of which both men were part. He entered the military and commanded a tank battalion against Israeli forces in the 1973 October War.

He advanced quickly through the ranks of the military, and was given the post of director of intelligence in Homs. In 1982, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, parts of which were already under Syrian military domination, he was assigned to head the Syrian intelligence there. He remained the head of Syrian security in the country for 20 years, effectively ruling his Lebanese proxies through a web of agents and loyalist bureaucrats, backed by the Syrian military presence. During this time, he gained a decisive Syrian influence over Lebanese affairs, and gradually subdued the warring Lebanese militias through a combination of diplomacy, bribery and force. Numerous sources point to his involvement in narcotics trafficking and smuggling centered in the Bekaa valley, where he also had his headquarters, and he is said to have emerged from his Lebanese campaign a wealthy man. After Israel's withdrawal from its occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000, Kanaan extended Syria's influence there, and backed the Hezbollah movement's takeover of the area.



After being an early backer of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad as a successor to his father, Kanaan was in 2002 summoned back to Damascus to become the head of Syria's political intelligence. He was succeeded in Lebanon by Rustum Ghazali. In 2004, after a string of bombings targeting leading Hamas members given sanctuary in Syria, claimed by Syria to have been the work of Israeli intelligence, Kanaan was raised by president Assad to the powerful cabinet post of interior minister, with control over numerous security agencies. On the internal Syrian political scene, Kanaan was considered close to the president, although at the same time part of the "old guard" of Syrian politics.

On June 30th 2005, the United States, which had been pressuring Syria over the Hariri bombing and to end Syrian occupation, declared that it would freeze all assets belonging to Kanaan and Ghazali, due to their involvement with the occupation of Lebanon, and also due to suspicions of "corrupt activities".

#### Death in October 2005

Kanaan died in his office, by a gunshot through the mouth, in Damascus on October 12 2005. After a one-day examination, Syrian authorities closed the case, Prosecutor Muhammad al-Luaji stating:

"Examination of the body and fingerprints as well as testimony from employees, including senior aide General Walid Abaza, indicated that it was a suicide by gunshot"

It has been suggested he was in fact murdered by the Syrian government, and various theories explaining the possible motives for this have been put forth. Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who had been variously allied and hostile to Kanaan during his stay in Lebanon, commented by saying that if Ghazi Kanaan was in fact linked to the Hariri assassination, then he was a "brave man" who "did well, if I may say, by committing suicide".

Kanaan was interviewed in September of 2005 by a United Nations team probing the February 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. Chief United Nations investigator Detlev Mehlis is expected to submit his report to Secretary-General Kofi Annan on October 21. Kanaan however denied any involvement in the assassination, for example in the phone interview he gave to the Lebanese broadcasting station Voice of Lebanon on the day of his death. In that interview he said "I think this is the last statement I might give".

#### Theories on Kanaan's death and possible involvement in the Hariri bombing

Ali Sadr el-Din Bayanouni, the London-based leader of the banned Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, told Al Jazeera that Kanaan, "indicated that he felt in danger, and this supports rumors that there has been a deal in which the Syrian regime might sacrifice some of its heads for saving the regime."

It has been reported that Kanaan opposed Assad's decision in 2002 to extend the term of the pro-Syrian Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, siding with then-prime minister Rafik al-Hariri whom





he is reported to have had a good relationship with. The term extension provoked the creation of a Lebanese nationalists' camp, whose anti-Syrian protests gained momentum after the murder of al-Hariri in 2005. It was seen as a strategic blunder by many supporters of the Syrian occupation, and is believed to have weakened the president's position. It has been suggested that Kanaan may have been part of such opposition to Assad's rule. Most sources however indicate that he kept the president's trust, and his appointment to interior minister after allegedly having opposed the term extension in 2002 seems to bolster this claim.

Zvi Bar'el in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz has presented a theory involving Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher and other conspirators within the regime wanting to get rid of Kanaan, whom they viewed as too powerful and too close to the president. This could also involve a plot to eventually get rid of Bashar himself, possibly connected to Hafez al-Assad's exiled brother Rifaat al-Assad. While this is only speculation, the article (linked below) presumes that the Mehles report will not only shed light on the Hariri killing, but also on the internal intrigues of the Syrian ruling elite.