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**Country Assessment of Syria:
What to Expect From New President Bashar Assad**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION..... | 3 |
| 1. UNDER HAZEF ASSAD..... | 3 |
| 2. DOMESTIC FRONT..... | 5 |
| 2.1 Economy..... | 6 |
| 2.2 Political regime and government policies..... | 9 |
| 3. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES..... | 11 |
| 3.1 Lebanon question..... | 11 |
| 3.2 Relations with Israel..... | 13 |
| 3.3 Syria and the war on terrorism..... | 14 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 15 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 17 |

INTRODUCTION

This assessment is intended to present the political situation in Syria and, more precisely, what is to be expected from the regime of Bashar Assad, son and successor of the precedent ruler Hafez Assad¹. The first section will briefly present the regime of Hafez Assad in place before his death in June 2000. Then the second section will address the question of domestic policies of Bashar Assad while the third will present some issues of foreign relations that the new president has to deal with.

1. UNDER HAFEZ ASSAD

After a bloody army coup on 23 February 1966, Hafez Assad ended up being in charge of the portfolio of defence minister. Following conflicts with Salah Jadid, the army chief of staff who staged the 1966 coup and who subsequently took control of the regime by becoming the assistant secretary-general of the Ba'ath Party², Hafez Assad achieved a bloodless military coup on 13 November 1970, ousting the civilian party leadership and assuming the role of prime minister.³

The main objectives of the government policies under Hafez Assad were as follow:⁴

- settlement of an **Arab-Israeli peace** including the return of the Golan Heights;
- reinforcement of his narrowly based **regime**;

¹ Please note that in this paper, for reasons of uniformity, 'Assad' is used instead of 'al-Asad' and 'Hafez' instead of 'Hafiz'.

² Founded by Michel 'Aflaq, a Syrian Christian, and Salah al-Din Al-Bitar, a Syrian Sunni, the Ba'ath Party embraces secularism and has attracted supporters of all faiths in many Arab countries, especially Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. Since August 1990, however, the party has tended to de-emphasize socialism and to stress pan-Arab unity: Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 'Background Note: Syria', *United States Department of State*, [Online], <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/bgn/index.cfm?docid=3580> (Page visited on 16 December 2001).

³ *Id.* See also Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus*, New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1988, p. 28-40.

- extension of Syrian control over **Lebanon**;⁵
- safeguard of **national security**;
- increase of **Syrian's influence** among its Arab neighbours.

Achieving peace with Israel was the main objective of Hafez Assad and for the last decade of his life, he insisted he had taken a 'strategic decision' to make peace with Israel. Yet when he died on June 10 2000, peace had not come. In fact, 'because he saw regional relations and politics in hegemonic terms, Assad believed Israel would remain a rival even after peace was concluded. Therefore, his negotiating stance was extremely tough; he did not want to give Israel anything that might give it an advantage in future rivalry.'⁶ For some observers, Syria's behaviour showed that Assad was not resigned to Israel's existence and was interested in stringing out the negotiations to preserve Syria's regional position rather than cutting a deal with Israel. 'But this [was] a curious misreading of Assad, one that could [have led] policy-makers to miss a rare opportunity to achieve a larger Middle East peace. In fact, Assad's behaviour has been anything but erratic: it has been consistent and predictable.'⁷

The Hafez Assad's political regime was of an authoritarian kind in which all important decisions had to be taken directly by the president himself. Following are some of the main characteristics of that regime and of Hafez Assad's administration of Syria:⁸

- **stability** after years of political chaos that had consumed the country since independence from France in 1946;⁹

⁴ See Henry Siegman, 'Being Hafez al-Assad: Syria's Chilly but Consistent Peace Strategy', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 3, May-June 2000, p. 3.

⁵ On the Lebanese issue, see Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, London, I.B. Tauris & Co., 1988, p. 267-289.

⁶ Leslie Susser, 'A Catalogue of Missed Opportunities', [Online], *The Jerusalem Report*, <http://www.jrep.com/Mideast/Article-7.html> (Page visited on 19 December 2001).

⁷ Henry Siegman, *supra* note 4, p. 2.

⁸ See Volker Perthes, 'The Political Economy of the Syrian Succession', *Survival*, vol. 43, no. 1, Spring 2001, p. 143-154 and Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, *supra* note 2.

- equilibrium enforced by a **coercive regime** with the help of a dozen intelligence agencies (the *mukhabarat*);
- suppression of people's right of **free speech**; in fact all political dissent was repressed, 'leaving plenty of people with unaired grievances';¹⁰
- led the economy into a dead-end, paying minimal attention to **economic issues**;
- focus put on the **peace process**, making the internal policy drift;¹¹ he assumed that domestic reforms would have to wait for a peace process with Israel to be concluded;
- **loyalty valued over ability** or honesty, mainly because of fear for his security;
- preservation of his strength using the **army's continued loyalty** and the effectiveness of Syria's large **internal security apparatus**;
- several main branches of the **security services** operating independently of each other and outside of the legal system; each was responsible for human rights violations.

2. DOMESTIC FRONT

On 25 July 2000, two weeks after his father's death, Bashar Assad officially became the new Syrian president. The country was then relatively stable and there was no competition over presidency. Indeed, his brother Basil, who was seen as the future successor of Hazef Assad, has died in a car accident in 1994, leaving Bashar as the father's only heir. Assad *père* had some time to prepare the succession but the question of Bashar Assad's competence and readiness for such a task remains.

⁹ See 'After Assad', *The Economist*, vol. 355, no. 8175, 17-23 June 2000, p. 18, 'Hazef Assad', *The Economist*, vol. 355, no. 8175, 17-23 June 2000, p. 128 and 'Like father, like son', *The Economist*, vol. 359, no. 8224, 2-8 June 2001, p. 65-66.

¹⁰ 'Bashar's world', *The Economist*, vol. 355, no. 8175, 17-23 June 2000, p. 25. See also 'Hazef Assad', *supra* note 9.

¹¹ See 'Hazef Assad', *supra* note 9.

Bashar Assad (hereinafter ‘Assad’) rapidly made it clear that he was to put more emphasis on domestic issues than on regional or international matters. And domestically, it can be said that the main challenge may be social unrest if the economic situation does not improve or deteriorates further, thus the importance for Bashar Assad to bolster Syrian economy.¹²

2.1 Economy

Syria economy is slowing. The reign of his father, who paid only minimal attention to domestic and economic issues¹³, left Assad with a struggling economy situation. The problems which Assad is facing on the economic level can be summarized in the following list:¹⁴

- large numbers of poorly performing **public sector firms**;
- low **investment** levels;
- relatively low **industrial and agricultural** productivity;
- ‘pervasive **cronyism**’;¹⁵
- stifling **bureaucracy**;
- inept **management**;
- Syria’s **oil reserves**, its largest source of hard currency, are dwindling and internal demand is rising; they are expected to run dry in a decade;¹⁶
- natural **demographic growth** puts an enormous pressure on schools and universities and also results in an annual 200,000-250,000 newcomers on the job market.

¹² Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8, p. 151.

¹³ Patrick Seale, *supra* note 5, p. 441.

¹⁴ See Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, *supra* note 2, ‘Autumn in Damascus’, *The Economist*, vol. 360, no. 8239, 15-21 September 2001, p. 56 and Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8.

¹⁵ ‘Autumn in Damascus’, *supra* note 14.

It is clear that to stay in power, Assad will have to reform Syrian economy and ‘turn it round’. Although most Syrians think of Assad as a clone of his father, they also associate him with a ‘faint draught of economic fresh air.’¹⁷ Expectations are high and if Assad really wants to avoid relying solely and completely on force and fear to stay in power, he will need to gain Syrian people’s confidence by taking care of the economic situation. To do so, Assad needed to have freer hands and about three months before his father’s death Syrian president-to-be Bashar Assad dismissed the Prime Minister and most other members of the cabinet in an attempt to distance the ruling party from the state.¹⁸

However, Assad cannot afford to offend the powerful Damascus elite on which he still depends for support. Therefore, he ‘allayed any perceived threat to the old guard’s political dominance by stating that a western-style democracy was not suitable for Syria. By ensuring that the existing power brokers, who currently benefit from the closed economic system, share in the profits of economic reform Bashar hopes to secure the stability of his succession.’¹⁹ So he is basically seeking to reach a balance between reform and continuity though gradual change in Syrian economy, a change that should keep the economy in good shape, ‘reaching 4.3% annual growth through the 2006 forecast period’²⁰, analysts say. But that is if he succeeds in his quest for domestic reform.

¹⁶ See ‘Bashar’s world’, *supra* note 10, p. 28, ‘Is Syria really changing?’, *The Economist*, vol. 357, no. 8197, 18-24 November 2000, p. 95 and Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8, p. 144.

¹⁷ ‘Bashar’s world’, *supra* note 10, p. 26.

¹⁸ On the reshuffling of the cabinet, see Gary C. Gambill, ‘Bashar Reshuffles Syrian Government’, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, [Online], http://www.meib.org/articles/0003_s3.htm (Page visited on 19 December 2001) and Janine Zacharia, ‘Cabinet reshuffle seen auguring ‘new period in Syrian history’’, *Jerusalem Post*, [Online], <http://www.jpost.com/Editions/2000/03/09/News/News.3746.html> (Page visited on 19 December 2001).

¹⁹ Sentinel Risk Pointers, ‘Eastern Mediterranean Risk Pointers – Syria’, *Jane’s*, [Online], http://www.janes.com/regional_news/africa_middle_east/sentinel/eastern_mediterranean/syria.shtml (Page visited on 16 December 2001).

²⁰ Country Report, ‘Treading Carefully toward New Alliances’, *Political Risk Services*, [Online], http://www.prsonline.com/country_page.asp?vCOUNTRY=167 (Page visited on 17 December 2001).

Such economic reform will call for more investment in the private-sector activities, involvement of the business community²¹ and might also bring demands for more political freedom. Some optimistic Syrians even suggest that Assad will gradually unravel his father's stifling police state.²²

The ultimate goal of these reforms is to move Syria towards a more market-based, modernized economic system. To do so, steps have to be taken by Assad and his government, some of which are already in progress. Among these steps are the following:²³

- encouraging **foreign direct investment** in Syria by stamping out corruption and reforming government regulations that inhibit free enterprise;
- far-reaching reforms in the **banking sector**;
- establishment of a **stock market**;
- removal of harsh **penalties for dealing in hard currency**;
- negotiations with the **European Union** to join a free trade zone in 2010;
- negotiations to eventually become a member of the **World Trade Organization**;
- legalization of **private banks**;
- harmonization of Syria's various **currency exchange rates**;
- technological **modernisation**.

‘In macro-economic terms,’ say analysts, ‘the Syrian government is likely to follow an expansive course for at least two or three years’.²⁴ But, in Syria like everywhere else, economic reforms have to be coupled with political reforms in order to be fully effective.

²¹ See Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8.

²² ‘Bashar’s world’, *supra* note 10, p. 28.

²³ See Gary C. Gambill, *supra* note 18, Energy Information Administration, ‘Syria Country Analysis Brief’, *United States Department of Energy*, [Online], <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/syria.html> (Page visited on 17 December 2001) and Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8.

²⁴ Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8, p. 150.

2.2 Political regime and government policies

The political position of Assad in Syria is of a special and evolving kind. He has to deal with influential supporters of his father within his government, the crucial need for economic reform, the grievances of a population who suffered oppression for 30 years, and regional and international issues. But to know what to expect from Bashar Assad, it is essential to analyse his regime and the main policies of his government.

Syria has been under a state of emergency since 1963. Syrian governments have justified martial law by the state of war which continues to exist with Israel and by continuing threats posed by terrorist groups.²⁵ Such situation gave complete control over the country to the government which has suppressed all challenges to its authority.

Following is a brief description of the Bashar Assad's regime and of the position he is now in:

- Assad is **ahead of all competitors** for power; however, his hold on the office is more tenuous than was his father's;²⁶
- Assad is 'cut from a very different cloth than his megalomaniac father [but he is also] a **neophyte ruler** unable to cut loose from his father's men',²⁷
- the government is dominated by **Alawites**, a small offshoot of Shia Islam, a fact that many Syrians still resent;²⁸
- Assad feels a strong commitment to meeting the expectations of **his own generation** and also seems more aware than his father of the **economic implications of peace**;²⁹

²⁵ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, *supra* note 2.

²⁶ Country Report, *supra* note 20.

²⁷ Daniel Pipes, 'Will the Assad dynasty last?', *DanielPipes.org*, [Online], <http://www.danielpipes.org/articles/20010606.shtml> (Page visited on 17 December 2001).

²⁸ 'Bashar's world', *supra* note 10, p. 26.

²⁹ Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8, p. 145.

- ‘even if he remains dependent on the knowledge and experience of his father’s ‘old guard’ of aides and companions, Bashar’s long-term interest is to **free himself from their influence** – at least in domestic affairs – and to expand his own clientele’;³⁰
- the present government is more a **collective leadership** made of an uneasy alliance of forces with more or less open conflicts between the old guard, Bashar Assad and his own team, and other individuals, mainly from the presidential family, who are trying to maintain their influence and build their own power networks and clienteles;³¹
- Assad puts more focus on **domestic issues** and emphasises reform and modernisation, including access to computer technology, the Internet and mobile telephones;
- the present system does not allow competitive presidential elections but only a **referendum on one candidate** nominated by the parliament on the proposal of the Ba’ath Party leadership.³²

One of the main objectives of Assad is to purge his entourage to free himself from the controlling and influential old guard. This seems to be the key to initiate reform in Syria, where everything linked with Hazef Assad seems to go against changes, reforms and new ideas. Therefore, we are likely to observe a purge of the regime from the political figures whose power bases are independent of the Assad family in order to leave few senior figures with the experience and authority to challenge the new regime.³³

So what is to be expected? Some analysts argue that Syria will develop a regime based on the Egyptian model. Such regime would be characterized by the maintenance of ‘a basically

³⁰ *Id.*, p. 146.

³¹ *Id.*, p. 147.

³² *Id.*, p. 152.

³³ For example, in 1998 – before Hazef Assad’s death – former intelligence chief Bashir al-Najjar was ousted and army chief of staff Hikmat al-Shihabi was removed; both had been at odds with Bashar Assad and were replaced with loyalists: Gary C. Gambill, *supra* note 18. See also ‘Bashar’s world’, *supra* note 10, p. 25.

authoritarian political system which nevertheless guarantees a modicum of legal security, a largely independent judiciary, and lively and open political debate.’ This is a very optimistic prediction. In fact, Syria is more likely to develop a regime on the Turkish model, characterized by a dualistic system where political pluralism is offset by the control of the national security apparatus over central political decisions.³⁴

Finally, it is interesting to note that ‘Syria’s Islamist movement has recently shown signs of coming back to life, nearly 20 years after 30,000 people were brutally massacred in Hama in 1982.’³⁵ But not much threat is to be felt from these groups unless social unrest gives them an opportunity to become more active again.

3. REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

Syria is an important player in the regional arena and the future actions of Assad are likely to have a great impact on the situation in the Middle East. Syria is principally concerned with the peace process with Israel and the presence of Syrian troops in Lebanon.

3.1 Lebanon question

Syrian troops have been present in Lebanon since October 1976, sent there by Hafez Assad during the Lebanese civil war. However, at the end of the war, the troops did not withdraw and Syria has been exercising a de facto control over Lebanon since then. With the death of Hafez Assad, uncertainty arose concerning the course of action of Bashar Assad towards the Lebanese question. Twenty five years ago, it could have been easy to find some public

³⁴ On these predictions, see the debatable analysis in Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8, p. 151.

³⁵ ‘Is Syria really changing?’, *supra* note 16, p. 95.

support in Lebanon for the Syrian ruler who was seen as ‘the one Arab leader to stand up to Israel’³⁶ but today, the vast majority of the population is suffocating. The physical presence of Syrian troops hurts less than the feeling of submission felt by the Lebanese population in front of the powerful and omnipresent Syrian intelligence services.³⁷

It is essential to understand that the Syrian presence in Lebanon is of ‘central importance to Syria's security philosophy. The Syrian deployment in the Beka'a Valley is important not only for the sake of maintaining its position in Lebanon, but also as a crucial component of Syria's defence system - protecting its soft underbelly on the Golan Heights and defending the Damascus area and the country's interior.’³⁸

Today, Lebanese factions begin to challenge Syrian domination. An increasing number of Lebanese citizens are questioning the military, political and economic dominance exercised by Syria over their country's internal affairs. And with Hafez Assad gone, the Lebanese parliament started to debate the question again. ‘Walid Jumblatt, a Druze leader and former Syrian stalwart, has joined the chorus of Maronite church leaders demanding the removal of Syria’s 35,000 troops. In response, Syrian troops are said to have been sent to Mr Jumblatt’s heartland in the Chouf mountains.’³⁹

The transfer of power in Damascus created an opportunity for regional rivals to increase their influence in Beirut, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Assad will therefore be forced to reassert

³⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation, ‘What now for Syria?’, BBC News, [Online], http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/middle_east/newsid_785000/785605.stm (Page visited on 19 December 2001).

³⁷ Sélim Abou, ‘Liban: Les veilles de l'université’, *Études*, no. 3951-2, July-August 2001, p. 9.

³⁸ Ephraim Kam, ‘Syria’s National Security Concept in the Wake of Peace Treaty with Israel’, *Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies*, [Online], <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/sa/v2n4p1.html> (Page visited on 16 December 2001).

³⁹ ‘Is Syria really changing?’, *supra* note 16, p. 95.

Syria's control over Lebanon.⁴⁰ However, it seems obvious that Bashar Assad is more reluctant to use the harsh methods of his father on Lebanon. There again, the new president is in face of a dilemma involving the 'ghost of his father' and his own vision of Syria. For now, Assad maintains the deployment of his 35,000 uniformed soldiers and 25,000 intelligence officers in Lebanon but without Hafez Assad at their command, it seems like their influence and effectiveness have greatly reduced.⁴¹ Moreover, the Israel's decision to end its occupation of southern Lebanon in May 2000 removed the best justification for the presence of Syrian troops in Lebanon.⁴² So it appears that the reduction of Syrian presence in Lebanon is unlikely to happen without a comprehensive peace settlement between Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

3.2 Relations with Israel

Apart from domestic questions, Israel is undoubtedly the main issue on Assad's political agenda. He will probably be more open to the settlement of a peace agreement with Israel than his father and compromises will be essential from both parties. On the Syrian side, however, it is clear that Israelis will be mistaken 'if they believe that the son, any more than the father, will yield on the return of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.'⁴³ Syria and Israel have two vastly different visions: Israel wants a peace that would guarantee its acceptance in the region and Syria wants a peace that would limit Israel's regional influence.⁴⁴ And since there is 'no indication that Bashar's views on the process are different from those of his father'⁴⁵, the process seems deemed to be in an impasse. But if they could reach a

⁴⁰ The Saudi government recently granted Lebanon \$100 million in low interest loans, including \$45 million to renovate the Beirut-Damascus highway. Iran has long been a key player in Lebanon and has used its relationship with the Lebanese Shiite fundamentalist group Hezbollah to pressure Israel.

⁴¹ See Daniel Pipes, *supra* note 17 and 'Bashar's world', *supra* note 10, p. 25.

⁴² 'Bashar's world', *supra* note 10, p. 26.

⁴³ 'After Assad', *supra* note 9. See also 'Bashar's world', *supra* note 10, p. 28 and Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8, p. 147.

⁴⁴ Leslie Susser, *supra* note 6.

⁴⁵ British Broadcasting Corporation, *supra* note 36.

compromise where Syria would accept not to get the whole region back and where Israel would accept to share the control of the Sea of Galilee's shoreline, a peace agreement between the two countries would be possible. However, the neophyte negotiator Assad is unlikely to achieve such a tremendous task, especially since he would have the double task of convincing Israel as well as his own entourage – mainly the army and the Ba'ath Party – of the viability of such agreement.

For now, the peace process will remain a stalemate especially since the regime elite no longer considers a major war with Israel as very likely.⁴⁶

3.3 Syria and the war on terrorism

The US-led war on terrorism has changed the face of international relations, especially in the Middle East. Syria had to make choices but the impact of Assad's decisions is not yet very clear. Before 11 September 2001, relations between Syria and the West were particularly strained 'because of Syrian support for groups involved in international terrorism, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, the Palestine Islamic Jihad, the Abu Nidal Organization, Hizballah, the Turkish Revolutionary Left (Dev Sol), the Kurdish Workers Party, and the Japanese Red Army.'⁴⁷ The war declared by the United States and the Western world being against terrorism, Syria had reasons to be worried about the actions to be taken against states supporting terrorism. Arab countries including Syria have been solicited to back the US-led military campaign against Afghanistan but with the number of civilian casualties in the air war angering Muslims across the world the response was not immediately sympathetic.

⁴⁶ Volker Perthes, *supra* note 8, p. 149.

⁴⁷ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, *supra* note 2.

For Assad, the war on terrorism has presented him with a new set of opportunities and risks. ‘On the one hand, the US has already held out the carrot of reduced restrictions on arms sales in an effort to gain his support for any military moves in the area. On the other hand, the many aggressive Islamic groups inside the country could create serious problems for his rule if he appears too compliant to the non-Islamic world.’⁴⁸ Again, Assad is torn between two main options and has to cleverly make his way through the tricky net of today’s international relations.

CONCLUSION

What to expect from the son of the ‘sphinx of Damascus’ is in itself a riddle. Many factors and many outside elements can have an impact on how the young Assad will rule his country, especially after the events following the attacks of 11 September 2001.

First it is not at all clear that Assad, who was training as an eye doctor in London until 1994, has the political skills or backing to preserve his power with any authority. Unlike his father and his brother, Bashar Assad has had only the briefest military training and the question of whether the powerful Syrian military will accept him as president remains.⁴⁹

If he stays in power, which is not a hundred percent sure, Assad will go on with his regime based on changes in domestic policies. Syrian foreign policy will for now stay the same as during Hazef Assad’s reign, except maybe for some slight changes in Syrian policy towards Lebanon.⁵⁰ But he has to be careful and make his moves cleverly since the old guard – mainly

⁴⁸ Country Report, *supra* note 20.

⁴⁹ British Broadcasting Corporation, *supra* note 36. See also ‘After Assad’, *supra* note 9.

⁵⁰ Eli Carmeli and Yotam Feldner, ‘Inquiry & Analysis No. 48 – Syria’, *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, [Online], <http://www.memri.org/ia/IA4801.html> (Page visited on 17 December 2001).

the security and intelligence apparatus and the Ba'ath Party – does not welcome changes and reforms and since Assad's legitimacy depends largely upon his control of the armed forces and his willingness to use force.⁵¹ Torn between his father's legacy and his willingness to reform Syria, Assad might actually realize that both paths currently are unattainable. Continuation would require more ruthlessness and transformation would require more skills. Unless Assad evolves into a more decisive and effective ruler, his days at the head of the country might be numbered. But he has the advantage of enjoying western support. The resurgence of Palestinian-Israeli fighting could also help him, diverting attention and uniting the ranks. It allows him to dismiss challengers as agents of Israel and, more important, it bolsters the case for continued military rule in Syria, at least for a while.⁵²

⁵¹ See Alain Gresh *et al.* (ed.), 'Une succession au pouvoir préparée', *Le monde diplomatique*, [Online], <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cahier/proche-orient/region-syrie> (Page visited on 18 December 2001).

⁵² 'Is Syria really changing?', *supra* note 16, p. 96.

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