

# The Death of Syria's Assad and the New War Danger in the Mideast

by Dean Andromidas

The war danger in the Middle East escalated with the death of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad on June 10. The danger does not derive from possible civil war in Syria, but from the determination, on the part of a desperate Anglo-American faction, in cahoots with the Zionist lobby, to respond to the collapse of the global financial system, with a new Middle East war. As neither Israel nor Syria is capable or willing, at this time, to fight such a war, the Anglo-American drive would more likely launch war against the "rogue states" Iran or Iraq.

The loudest voices for war, ostensibly against Syria, if it refuses to withdraw from Lebanon, are coming from the foreign policy groupings behind the Bush campaign, shared by their counterparts behind Al Gore (see next article). At the same time, the drumbeat for action against the so-called "rogue states," has become louder. For example, the mysterious disappearance of computer disks from the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, containing nuclear secrets, could be the stuff to fabricate a terrorism incident (with or without weapons of mass destruction), that could serve as a pretext for military action against an alleged rogue state.

The stage for war was set, before Assad's demise, by U.S. President Bill Clinton's failure to follow through on his Middle East peace initiatives. The collapse of the Clinton-Assad summit in Geneva last March did not signal a "hardening of the Syrian position"; quite the contrary, Clinton went to the summit promoting the hard-line Zionist territorial position against returning the Golan Heights to Syria, which he knew—or should have known—the ailing Assad could not accept. Had Clinton presented an approximation of a viable program for overcoming the underlying issue of conflict, which is water; had he proposed a plan for production of new water supplies through massive application of desalination, there could have been progress. Instead, Clinton offered nothing but intransigence, and demonstrated that he had essentially handed over Middle East policy to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. It must be understood, that Clinton's commitment to the Presidential campaign of Vice President Gore, and his wife Hillary's New York campaign for the U.S. Senate, precludes any initiatives that might alienate the Zionist lobby, whose decisive political weight both candidates are avidly courting.

This failure not only collapsed the Syria-Israel talks but weakened the leadership of both countries.

## Power Vacuum: Damascus

Assad's death occurred in the midst of a reorganization in the Syrian regime, to prepare for Assad's son, Bashar, to take over. The reorganization began in the 1990s, when Assad sought to broaden the base of his government, from the tight circle of leaders from his own Alawite minority, to a much broader regime encompassing political, economic, and military circles among Syria's Sunni Muslim majority. A peace agreement with Israel would have consolidated this process and ensured stability in Syria following his death.

Although virtually all Arab states, in a demonstration of support for Bashar, were represented at the funeral by their respective heads of state, only France, among the Western nations, sent its head of state, President Jacques Chirac. Even Russia failed to send a senior delegation. The United States sent Secretary Albright, reportedly out of concern that the presence of Clinton or Gore might offend the Zionist lobby. The net result, is that, except for France, no Western power has established ties with the new leader in Damascus.

Bashar's assumption of power, has been organized according to the rules: First, the Constitution was amended by Parliament, to allow a person under the age of 40 to rule (Bashar is 34); then, Bashar was to be named head of the Baath Party at its congress, scheduled for June 17-18; and, on June 25, the Parliament is to formally nominate him as President, followed shortly by a popular referendum on his candidacy. Despite the orderly transition, the absence of a peace agreement, and Assad's untimely death, leaves the succession open to provocations. The most visible has come from Hafez Assad's half-brother, Rifaat, who, after his death, released a statement challenging the legitimacy of Bashar's ascendancy to the Presidency.

Living in exile in Marbella, Spain, Rifaat has no popular base or influence among ruling circles in Syria. Nonetheless, as head of a massive international drug- and gun-running operation, Arab sources have indicated, he has the capability to create terrorist provocations. Moreover, Rifaat, through his criminal activities, maintains links with right-wing Israeli networks, which would be eager to create provocations of their own. Israeli strongman Ariel Sharon reportedly met with Rifaat recently, in Spain. Rifaat, through his son, owns a satel-

lite TV station, the Arab News Network, which, not coincidentally, is located in London.

Another provocation is the great show of concern about Syria's so-called overlordship of Lebanon, as expressed by recent statements from Secretary Albright, and other Anglo-American and Israeli circles. In reality, this is pure hypocrisy. Syria's presence in Lebanon was the result of agreements brokered during the shuttle diplomacy days of Henry Kissinger in the 1970s. Kissinger, who engineered the brutal Lebanese civil war, then negotiated several treaties and agreements to legitimize both Israeli and Syrian occupation of Lebanon, in order to sabotage any lasting Middle East peace. Syria's presence was again legitimized by the Bush administration in 1990, in order to gain its support for Bush's war against Iraq.

Even Israeli sources admit that Syria has been trying to militarily disengage from Lebanon since 1991, but they will never do it as a dictate from Israel or any other power. The absence of comprehensive peace agreements between Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinians, including Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, precludes any attempt to force a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon by Syria. In fact, at Assad's funeral, the very visible presence of the top Lebanese political leadership, and its participation in the ceremonies, underlined the fact that Syrian-Lebanese relations are being further strengthened.

The real concern of the Anglo-Americans is Syria's alliance with Iran, the principal target of the Anglo-Americans in the Middle East. One Israeli intelligence source told *EIR* that the current Syrian leadership would never give up this alliance in return for "promises" from the West. In his view, "They might consider it if a major regional Marshall Plan were implemented in the Middle East to underpin a comprehensive regional settlement."

Thus, those who are threatening Syria's position in Lebanon, even with military intervention, seek to force it to break its strategic alliance with Iran, and even to support war against Iraq or Iran.

### **Power Vacuum: Israel**

While many fear a power vacuum in Damascus, the real power vacuum exists in Israel. If the Syrian President is dead, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's government coalition is comatose.

On June 13, the right-wing religious Shas Party announced it would leave Barak's coalition government, over an ongoing dispute on state financial support for the latter's private school system. Their withdrawal would lead to a collapse of Barak's coalition, leaving Barak to either create a minority government, which would eventually lead to early elections, or go for national unity government with the right-wing Likud, whose leader, Sharon, is known as the Butcher of Lebanon. Sharon made known on June 15, that a national unity coalition with Barak's One Israel, was out of the ques-

tion. In either case, the peace process has been sacrificed.

With the absence of a strong government, it would be impossible for Barak to come to the final agreements with the Palestinians by the September deadline, after which Palestinian National Authority President Yasser Arafat has declared he will unilaterally declare independence.

Barak has been seriously weakened by Clinton's failing. A peace agreement with Syria, had been at the center of his political strategy of reaching peace agreements with all his Arab neighbors, including the Palestinians and the Lebanese. The collapse of the Syrian initiative forced him to withdraw unilaterally from southern Lebanon, without a negotiated peace agreement. The Lebanese withdrawal has yet to be recognized as in compliance with relevant United Nations resolutions. Thus, it continues to be a tinder box for a regional conflict.

### **Water or War**

On June 13, the Israeli state water company, Mekorot, issued a report that Israel faces a water emergency. It stated that by the end of this summer, the level of the Sea of Galilee, which provides 60% of Israel's water resources, will drop below the lowest red line discussed so far, -214 meters. In addition, the mountain aquifer which is under the West Bank and along the Lebanese-Syrian border, will drop to a level that could cause the Sea of Galilee to become saline, making the entire lake unusable. If Israel suffers another drought next year, it will suffer a shortage of drinking water of some 130 million cubic meters, even if the allocation of water to farmers is completely halted. Ze'ev Golani, a hydrological consultant for Mekorot, was quoted by the daily *Ha'aretz* as saying, "Tel Aviv will be like a Third World city. Some streets will not have water part of the time, or some cities will not have water for a few hours each day."

Syria, Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip are also suffering dramatic water emergencies.

The emergence of water as a potential flashpoint is another bitter fruit of the collapse of the Syria-Israel peace talks, in which both water, especially the Sea of Galilee, and land were the key issues. As part of an agreement, a regional water authority was to have been established to develop the entire Jordan River basin, which is shared by Israel, Syria, Jordan, the Palestinian National Authority, and Lebanon. Such an arrangement could have only worked with massive U.S. economic involvement.

The U.S. President could still act to revive the peace process. This would require supporting the cooperation among various countries in the region, to ensure the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon, and to redefine the question of Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, as a component in an overall peace agreement. Such a peace agreement could function, only to the extent that a serious regional infrastructure development perspective were proposed, pivoted on the crucial issue of creating new sources of water.