

**“Yes, he can.” A reappraisal of Syrian foreign under Bashar
al-Asad**

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Reviewed books:

Barry Rubin, *The Truth about Syria*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria. Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2007.

Jörg Dostal and Anja Zorob, *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Relationship*, St. Andrews, Centre for Syrian Studies, distributed by Lynne Rienner, 2009.

Fred Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, London, Saqi Books, 2009.

In July 2008, at the Paris meeting held to launch the Union for the Mediterranean (UM), the Syrian President Bashar al-Asad was probably the most important guest. President Sarkozy had invited al-Asad not only to attend the meeting on the UM, but to participate the celebration for the 14th of July in the French capital. This was the most potent signal to date that Syria's crucial role in the Middle East was reluctantly acknowledged since the marginalisation it suffered following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Since then, 'from a position of almost complete rupture and isolation, Syria has become a sought-after player on the international scene' (Zisser, 2009: 108).

How did Syria manage to move from a position of almost complete isolation to one where the country is once again a crucial actor in regional politics? In addition, how did the regime ensure its domestic stability despite significant international pressures and economic underperformance? The answer to such questions lies in a multi-level understanding of the power structures affecting the regional system and on the complexity of Syrian domestic politics. First and foremost, Syrian foreign policy of the last few years has been based on the realist principle of balancing. Rather than submitting to US 'unipolarity', Syria opted for balancing when it felt that its national security was under threat. This is most evident if one examines the foreign policy adopted

in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq. This balancing however needs to be analysed in combination with the concept of resistance (*muqāwamah*), which has become the essence of the political discourse of actors opposing the externally-driven political restructuring of the Middle East. The adoption of a balancing stance coupled with the renewed legitimacy that ‘leading the resistance’ provides allowed the Syrian regime to meet its domestic challenges, which are mainly linked to continuous economic underperformance. The over-bloated and inefficient public sector and significant demographic growth are largely responsible for the relative backwardness of the economy. This has led to a rise in unemployment and poverty together with a slashing of subsidies and rising prices for first necessity commodities. All this has yet to be offset by the growth of the private sector. As George (2003: 162) pointed out, ‘it is on its economic performance rather than on its record on democracy or human rights that the regime is most vulnerable.’

The US failure in Iraq, the political stalemate in Lebanon following Syrian withdrawal and the rise in strength of both Hamas and Hizbollah vindicate to a large extent Syria’s foreign policy choices and have put to rest the doubts about the statesmanship of Bashar al-Asad. The ability to extricate itself from a very threatening position has allowed Syria to invest its political capital and legitimacy on the home front in order to meet the challenge of broadening the constituencies supporting the regime. While in the longer term, the co-optation of rising social groups may undermine Asad’s rule, for the moment ordinary Syrians have rallied around the flag, allowing the leadership the opportunity to widen its room to manoeuvre. A number of factors contributed to this. First of all, the sectarian violence in Iraq demonstrated what could happen in the Syrian streets if the authoritarian regime were suddenly removed, revealing implicitly the preference for an enlightened authoritarianism over the uncertainty of change. Secondly, the regime gave room to Islamic charities to provide social welfare in urban settings, indirectly accepting the rise of Islamist social movements (Pierret and Selvik 2009). Finally, the regime has proved the

resilience of Arab identity in a moment of confrontation with the West. This has had the unintended consequence of silencing the opposition group with the strongest potential for mobilization against the regime: the Muslim Brotherhood (Talhamy 2009). This is because Asad, unlike most of the other Middle East rulers, cannot be outflanked in foreign policy matters by radical Islamists. The paradox of the shifts in state-society relations is however that purely political opposition is being brutally repressed precisely because of the new found strength of the regime. Furthermore, the ability to meet some of the most significant domestic challenges has then been used, in a feedback loop, to further expand the room to manoeuvre abroad. Thus, it is only through the linkage of external and internal dynamics that one can explain the undeniable success Syria had in withstanding the external and domestic challenges it faced when Bashar al-Asad took (Hinnebusch, 2005; Perthes, 2004). In fact it could be argued that contrary to the expectations of many both within and outside Syria, Bashar has, through his foreign policies, put to rest the questioning of his legitimate succession to his father. The four books under review analyse the role of Syria in global and regional politics, providing an interesting variety of perspectives on Syrian foreign policy, based on conflicting theoretical assumptions.

Rubin's work is the most controversial due its normative posturing, representing a body of scholarship that deals with Syria as a redoubtable enemy for the US and Israel. Rubin's central thesis is based on the 'domestic insecurity hypothesis' (Jouejati, 2009: 186). In short, this hypothesis postulates that the guiding principle of Syrian foreign policy is regime survival. It is from this hypothesis that Rubin derives all other conclusions about Syrian engagement with the international community. Rubin describes the Syrian regime as unstable, minority-led, lacking in popular legitimacy and dictatorial and therefore in need of engagement in external conflicts to distract domestic attention from its sectarian Alawite character and to justify its repressive rule. From this depiction of the regime, it follows that foreign policy is not about seeking conflict

resolution; the regime's real objective is to maintain a significant degree of regional instability so that it can continue to maintain its grip on power in the name of national security. Rubin is quite correct in arguing that Syria is not an accommodating actor, but this is because the terms of accommodation offered by external actors contradict Syria's vital security interests and its identity, not because of the authoritarian and sectarian nature of the regime. Rubin's understanding of Syrian foreign policy leads him to claim that Syrian participation in the negotiations with Israel under Turkish mediation are only half-hearted and should not be understood as a meaningful process to recover its occupied territory. Engagement in a never-ending peace process allows Damascus to prevent external intervention and it permits simultaneously to cause troubles throughout the region in order to be perceived as indispensable for their resolution. This argument that authoritarian states use their foreign policy in order to counter their lack of domestic legitimacy and constitute a threat for neighbouring democratic states suffers however from a number of problems. From an empirical point of view it is questionable whether authoritarian states are more aggressive than democratic ones (Rosato, 2003). Secondly, Rubin fails to consider the presence of other actors in the regional system and he conceives of Syrian foreign policy in a vacuum, which then makes Damascus always pro-active and capable of strongly influencing regional politics. This is a misleading representation of the reality. While it might be true that Damascus acts at times as a spoiler, we should take into account that Syria operates under severe regional and global constraints given the presence of powerful actors in its own front- and backyard. This means that Syria's foreign policy is often reactive (Jouejati, 2009). Specifically, Rubin's claim that regional conflicts are the product of 'Syria's mischief' is dubious. After all, it is improbable that the Iraq quagmire the US finds itself in is only caused by foreign fighters and weapons transiting through Syria. A similar argument can be made regarding the instability in Lebanon. One should not forget that successive Israeli invasions of the country profoundly altered Lebanese power structures and sectarian relations. When it comes to

the issue of the Golan Heights and the peace discussions with Israel, it is also dubious to claim that the Syrians are only interested in prolonging the negotiations *ad infinitum* in order to secure regime survival. An in-depth examination of Israeli-Syrian relations on this point convincingly highlights how Israel has been more often responsible for the failure of securing an agreement (Slater, 2002). Finally, Rubin's analysis rests on questionable assumptions about Syrian domestic structures. Reducing domestic politics to the sectarian dichotomy of an Alawite minority pitted against a Sunni majority fails to capture the complexity of current socio-political and regime structures. This interpretation had already come under criticism in the past (Perthes, 1990) and the portrayal of the two groups as cohesive makes even less sense today with trends towards homogenization of political identities (Sadowski, 2002) under the consolidation of Syria's state institutions (Hinnebusch, 2005). More importantly, Rubin's argument is based on the idea that the Syrian leadership has free rein in conducting foreign policy, but this overlooks the divisions within the foreign-policy making apparatus and that were for instance evident on the issue of the withdrawal from Lebanon.

Zisser's study equally deals with Syrian domestic and foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad. Zisser's volume is neatly divided into two sections. The first and much more convincing one focuses on the domestic level, while the more problematic second part analyses the 'blunders' of Bashar al-Asad whom he labels an 'inexperienced amateur in conducting foreign policy' (p. 126). Zisser provides a nuanced study of Bashar's first years of 'commanding Syria.' Embedded in a narrative of succession and transfer of rule from father to son, Zisser offers an in-depth characterization of Syria's political system. His analysis of its power structures, reasons for enduring stability and the accurate description of dynamics surrounding the transfer of rule allow readers to clearly grasp the nature and scale of the domestic challenges facing Bashar al-Asad upon coming to power. Zisser's arguments are particularly convincing because they avoid simplistic

assumptions about the domestic political game. However when Zisser moves to analyse Syrian foreign policy, he is on shakier ground. The main problems with his analysis of foreign policy derive from over-emphasising the figure of Bashar al-Asad. This leads to a number of assumptions that fail to capture the complexities of Syrian foreign policy-making and, more importantly, the complexity of the regional system where other powerful actors operate, constraining Syria's behaviour. In some ways, Zisser makes a similar mistake to Rubin by excluding from the analysis the actions and decisions of all other actors, including the other Arab states, in the regional game, preventing therefore a dynamic explanation for how Syria responds. The over-emphasis on leadership begins with the assertion that Hafiz al-Asad had left such an imprint on the country that 'an argument can be made for the near total identification of the Syrian state with its leader.' There might be a degree of truth to this, but the following logical step that Zisser takes is more problematic. In his study, Bashar al-Asad is depicted as widely inexperienced and lacking the support of crucial constituencies within the regime; he is unable to fill his father's shoes and this leads him to commit serious errors. Zisser focuses in particular on the poor relationship with the US, which led to the international isolation of the country and, more importantly, to the loss of Lebanon. The explanation of Syrian foreign policy decisions over the last decade as a series of errors is not very convincing if one looks at how Syria has actually re-entered the game as an indispensable regional actor. For instance, the breakdown of the relationship with the U.S. that his father had carefully managed since the end of the Cold War can hardly be solely Bashar's fault. In fact, immediately following 9/11, the degree of cooperation in the 'war on terror' between the U.S. and Syria was substantial, highlighting how acutely aware the Syrian leadership was of the importance of the relationship with the U.S. It is with the invasion of Iraq that the wedge between the two countries became wider and there was little that Bashar could do to stop the Bush administration, if not warning Washington of the regional chaos that would ensue. Once American

troops were in Iraq and noises were made in the U.S. that Syria would and should be next in line, Syria decided that the best strategy to adopt was to take a number of balancing actions directed at countering U.S. influence in the region, including discreet support for the Iraqi resistance. The U.S. adventure in Iraq added to the already existing and diverging interests between the two countries, including the peace-process with Israel, which had come to a shuddering halt following the second Intifada. Balancing also took place at a wider regional level and while Syria was indeed forced out of Lebanon, it used its Lebanese allies to make sure that its most significant interests there would be protected. In addition, the departure of the Syrian powerbroker from Lebanon seemed to clearly destabilise the country, bringing sectarian politics again to the fore. The subsequent developments, such as the ability of Hizbollah to hold on to its guns and the election of a president Syria can live with, demonstrate this quite clearly. Ultimately therefore, the supposed blunders that Bashar made and that forced Syria out of Lebanon have resulted in quite a positive outcome for Syria. In conclusion, Zisser offers a very interesting comparison between Hafez and Bashar in dealing with foreign policy challenges. He ‘praises’ Hafez for his ability to conduct a foreign policy that achieved a degree of success given the regional constraints, but fails to bestow the son with the same abilities. In this, his argument has been proven partially wrong because, under more severe constraints and facing the much more direct challenge of invasion, Bashar has done equally well in protecting fundamental Syria interests.

A further demonstration of its balancing tactics when the country was under threat and isolated by the George W. Bush administration can be found in Syria’s attempt to ‘re-discover Europe.’ As Hinnebusch (2003: 1) stated, ‘a major alteration in Syria’s policy under Bashar was the strategic priority given to relations with Europe.’ There seem to be two fundamental reasons that can explain the search for a partnership with the European Union. Domestically, the Syrian ruling elites believed that the underperforming economy could benefit from the administrative overhaul

and the aid that Europe guarantees to its partners. In addition, liberalisation of trade could have brought much needed foreign investment. Internationally, a closer partnership with the European Union, embodied in the Association Agreement (AA), would have signalled to regional rivals that the Syrian regime was not isolated and retained legitimacy and significance. The relationship between Syria and the European Union is dealt in detail with in the book by Dostal and Zorob. Zorob's contribution is highly descriptive, but it brings to light two very significant points. First of all, it emerges quite clearly that the content of the Agreement deviated from the EU norm. Agreements with other MENA countries did not contain the same extensive economic, political and security provisions. This meant that Syria had to make many more concessions in the negotiation process with the European Union, including a very problematic clause on non-proliferation, which in the regional context amounted to a virtual recognition of its inability to withstand Israeli superiority. The second important point we can infer from Zorob's analysis is that Syria comes across as a rather weak actor in need of finding powerful actors to cooperate with to cope with the pressure of the US and Israel. Accordingly, Damascus was willing to tolerate significant internal costs by pushing through far-reaching neo-liberal reforms and compromise on issues of national security. When the AA was frozen by the EU following the falling-out between France and Syria over Lebanon because of the Hariri assassination, it was the Syrians who were most disturbed by this decision because they had invested a significant political capital in the negotiations. Over the course of the negotiation process and after the initialization of the agreement, the European Union put a number of stumbling blocks in the path of signature and ratification by citing diverse issues such as human rights, proliferation and lack of cooperation to overcome the political stalemate in Lebanon and to disarm Hizbollah. Dostal's contribution focuses more on the potential costs for Syria of entering into a 'neo-liberal' Association Agreement with the EU. Using the theoretical tools of dependency theory, Dostal quite convincingly argues that many of the provisions of the AA

would be detrimental to the Syrian economy if they were to come in effect. What is interesting about Dostal's analysis is that it coincides with criticism of the Agreement in certain sectors of Syrian society because, as he argues, 'many sections of the society are likely to see a deterioration in their social status as a breach of an implicit contract between their social interests and state agency' (6). As mentioned above, despite such high internal costs, Syria was not only willing to sign, but was pushing for early ratification. Paradoxically, the European game of attempting to extract even more advantages has now backfired. The success of the balancing actions of Syria combined with its perceived uncompromising stance on the front of 'resistance' in the aftermath of the Gaza war in 2008-2009 began to reaffirm Syria's indispensable role in the region, leading the international community to recognize Damascus as a privileged interlocutor for regional stability. Given this, Damascus no longer needs to go along with an Agreement which might result in paying high internal costs. Thus, in order to avoid domestic criticism and discontent for signing a potentially damaging neo-liberal document, Syria has now unilaterally and indefinitely postponed the signature of the AA. What is interesting in the relations between the EU and Syria is that it demonstrates the validity of the 'balancing argument.' When Syria needed the EU as a potential mediator with the United States and an external 'legitimizer' it was willing to bear significant internal costs to have a privileged partnership with the EU, but as soon as the need to forcefully balance receded, it refused to undermine its domestic stability by accepting what amounts to undue interference in its own internal affairs.

All the issues discussed above are brought together in what is the most enlightening volume on Syria of the last few years: Fred Lawsons's *Demystifying Syria*. In this edited volume, all the contributors are intent on challenging a number of myths that surround mainstream and normative interpretations of Syria. The contributors tackle both domestic politics and foreign policy from different disciplinary perspectives, providing innovative explanations and insightful analyses

of a changing Syria under Bashar al-Asad. When it comes to the international role of Syria there is very little doubt that Salloukh's chapter is not only very informative, but analytically sound and much more in line with the reality on the ground than Rubin's and Zisser contributions. Through the theoretical prism of realism, Salloukh clearly explains the balancing strategy of Syria and offers a very convincing account of how Damascus managed to survive the very real crisis it faced in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq to become once again a decisive and powerful actor on the regional scene. Rather than relying on facile assumptions about the domestic insecurity paradigm and on the miscalculation thesis so central in Zisser's argument, Salloukh privileges a systemic explanation. The missing link that can be found in Salloukh's argument is that he does not deal very much with what we termed the feedback loop and the regime-legitimizing concept of 'resistance', but this does not undermine the validity of his argument because there is no doubt that the balancing stance of Syria is crucial to understand the regime's current success. A similar argument can be made regarding Lawson's contribution on the neglected topic of Turkish-Syrian relations. Through a very thick description of the relations between the two countries since the late 1990s, Lawson amply demonstrates how new patterns of behaviour can be detected in Syrian foreign policy, which is therefore not the static and ossified actor that Rubin would want us to believe. This is for example demonstrated in Bashar's decision to renounce the territorial claim that Syria had over the province of Hatay (Iskanderun). We can infer from Lawson's work that a better relation with Turkey serves the balancing requirements of Syria. In addition, having Turkey as a mediator with Israel signals that Syria is now putting its trust in a country with which it almost went to war a decade ago to act as an honest broker with its main regional rival. The contributions on domestic politics are equally impressive, particularly the ones by Pierret, Ismail and Ababsa. The latter in particular shows the interlacements of regional and local dynamics through the exploration of Iranian influences at Shi'a shrines in Syria. The main strength of this edited volume is that it is not 'normatively obsessed'

with the Syrian regime and analyses both domestic and international changes by treating the country and its leadership as rational actors attempting to satisfy their preferences with the capabilities at their disposal. This enterprise therefore contributes to a much clearer understanding not only of Syrian foreign policy, but also of the regional dynamics that have affected the MENA since the beginning of the new millennium.

The ability of Syria to not only survive, but to a certain extent to thrive in a very challenging environment requires an explanation that goes beyond what much of the literature on Syrian foreign policy, with its normative obsession, has offered so far. It is no longer sufficient to describe and interpret Syria's external relations through the simplistic lenses of the dictatorial and 'evil' nature of the regime or through the personality of its president Bashar al-Asad. While normative judgments should be passed on the nature of the regime in Damascus, the realist notion that domestic politics does not necessarily explain external behaviour seems to hold true in the case of Syria and regional politics overall. Far from being the amateurish leader that Zisser describes, Bashar al-Asad has proven the resilience of Syria without having enormous resources at his disposal and without betraying the value and significance of resistance to outside interference. The concept of resistance is very relevant when one analyses Syrian foreign policy and merits closer attention. Rubin (167-168) attempts to deconstruct the concept, highlighting that "'resistance' is to battle against something, not to have any positive program of one's own. The word gives away the secret; it is a reactionary effort to maintain an undesirable status quo.' This characterization serves to demean the concept and underscore its pliability to *realpolitik* interests. However, such an understanding of resistance is quite problematic as is the interpretation that Rubin gives of its consequences in foreign policy-making. There is no doubt that Syrian foreign policy is militant and the concept of resistance is embedded in it. This is the result of Syria's self-perception of its political role in the region, which allows a portrayal of Bashar by the regime as the 'beacon of

resistance’, ‘the beating heart of Arabism’, and guardian and defender of the Arab cause which has a strong and persistent appeal for Syrians and the wider Arab public. Such portrayal is not only instrumental, but contains a powerful discursive identification. It follows that today’s Syria does not actually seek to maintain the regional status quo as Rubin argues. On the contrary, Syria is attempting to break the strategic dominance of Israel and the United States. Defiance of the global (US) and regional (Israel) hegemon via asymmetric balancing occurs through a set of alliances with both state and non-state actors that are bound together by common interests, but also by a common discourse of resistance to anti-imperialism and Western penetration. Obviously different actors such as Hamas, Hizbullah and Iran construct and select a specific form of the discourse of resistance suited to their interests and position, but this does not mean that they do not share a common core that binds them in their anti-status quo stances. In the specific case of Syria, resistance is not simply ‘empty words’ to feed the domestic public, but it is, when circumstances allow it, a very concrete practice. Thus, when the Gaza war occurred, Syria did not take any military action against Israel because of the power imbalance between the two countries, but in the name of Arab solidarity Syria did welcome over a million Iraqi refugees and hundreds of thousands of Lebanese during the *Harb Tammuz* of 2006. These are very tangible deeds that strengthen the credibility of the Syrian leadership and can be re-invested as political capital in foreign policy-making. In many ways therefore ‘the identification of Syrian interests with the Arab cause is no mere fiction and a purely Syria-centred policy never took form: had it done so, Syria could long ago have reached a Sadat-like settlement over the Golan. ... Syria’s interests coincided more than those of other Arab states with wider Pan-Arab norms, and without pan-Arab solidarity those goals could not be achieved. Syria’s definition of its “national interest” and role conception could be best characterised as Syro-centric Arabism’ (Hinnebusch & Etheshami, 1997: 60). These identity dynamics should not be considered irrelevant relics of the past and should be taken into account when explaining Syrian

foreign policy. As Salloukh (p. 172) concludes, ‘foreign policy based on classical balancing, asymmetric balancing and balking has enabled Syria to resist to its geopolitical interests and protect the security of the regime.’ Together with the concept of resistance to western penetration, this explains Syria’s choice of alliances, partnerships and policy courses much more than accounts based on notions of ideology related to the creation of a Greater Syria, of sectarianism built around the vague concept of a ‘Shi’a Crescent’ and of the miscalculations of its president.

Given the widely diverging theoretical frameworks applied in the volumes under review to explain and assess Syrian foreign policy, it is not surprising to find profound differences over policy implications. For Rubin, the only author to directly address policy suggestions, the best means to tackle the problems that Syria is creating in the region is a mixture of isolation and pressure. Rubin argues that Syria has no legitimate grievances in foreign policy and the ones it has are simply a smokescreen to allow the regime to survive. Accordingly, Syria behaves in a disruptive manner to pre-empt the conclusion of peace process negotiations with Israel because it would force Damascus to deal with its unstable internal situation. The only way to deal with the Syrian regime is to isolate it, put under intense pressure and if necessary resort to covert operations to show up its weaknesses until it decides to accept the imposition of an externally-constructed security and political order. Zisser differs quite substantially from Rubin’s position and he seems to implicitly accept the legitimacy of some of the Syrian grievances, particularly the ones linked to the conflict with Israel. In this respect, Zisser seems to suggest that a policy mix of containment and careful engagement with Damascus to solve the problem of the Golan Heights should be attempted provided that a less poisonous regional climate comes into being. Zorob implicitly advocates a policy of critical engagement when it comes to EU-Syrian relations. The Association Agreement, despite the shortcoming and the potential economic and social costs that Dostal points to,

constitutes an excellent instrument with which the international community can begin to engage with Syria and, over the long-term, moderate its foreign policy stances. Lawson's edited book has the specific intention of demystifying Syria by criticising current assumptions about the country and, by implication, the policies in place to deal with Damascus.

The days when Syria was threatened by military intervention are gone and it seems that all Western actors see the possibility of engaging Syria at a different level. This necessarily means recognising both the legitimate grievances and the interests Syria has in the region. Through its foreign policy positions Syria represents a powerful player in the Arab world that is opposed to Western penetration and interference in the region and to the double standards that the international community seems to have when dealing with regional actors. Whether this resistance stance has concrete foundations is to a certain extent irrelevant because the perception of Western imperialism and Israeli expansionism does exist and needs to be addressed. This does not mean giving in to Syrian blackmail if it occurs, but it requires the acknowledgment that Syria should be dealt with as a rational actor whose identity is deeply embedded in the discourse and practice of resisting the encroachment of security, political, social and economic structures it perceives as menacing.

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