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Assad's Situation

Syria's military machine may be hollow—but it isn't harmless.

By Fred Kaplan

Posted Tuesday, April 15, 2003, at 3:25 PM PT



Syria's military mess and ... behavior" across the board.

Bashar Assad, the young president of Syria, has got to be more than a little nervous right now. George W. Bush's press spokesman has called his country "a [rogue nation](#)." Unnamed senior officials are labeling him a member of the "junior varsity axis of evil." Even before U.S. tanks zoomed into Baghdad, Donald Rumsfeld was warning him to stop helping high-level Iraqi refugees or face the consequences. Now that the three-week lightning war is over, Colin Powell is saying that, "in light of this new environment," Assad should review his "actions

And unlike Saddam Hussein, who may well have deluded himself with all those video [screenings of Black Hawk Down](#), Assad must know that the Syrian military is no match for even a lightweight U.S. assault, should Bush decide to launch one.

On paper, Assad's armed forces seem formidable. His army has 215,000 soldiers with a similar number in the reserves. It includes eight armored divisions and three mechanized divisions, equipped with 4,700 tanks, 4,500 armored personnel carriers, 850 surface-to-air missiles, and 4,000 anti-aircraft guns. His air force consists of 40,000 personnel and 611 combat planes. By these measures, the Syrian military may appear to have more firepower than Saddam's did. However, in real life, it is burdened with at least as many shortcomings.

[Anthony Cordesman](#), of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, itemizes some of these problems in a paper published just today. For example, take those 4,700 tanks. About 2,000 of them are 1960s-vintage T-55s, another 1,000 only slightly newer T-62s, both models from the USSR and utterly useless in modern combat. About 1,700 are T-72s, from the 1970s and '80s, but many of those are embedded in static defensive positions, and none have received much in the way of spare parts or maintenance since the Soviet Union went under.

The Syrian army was not merely supplied but trained by the Soviets, and so inherited their highly centralized, top-down, take-no-initiative style of warfare. In July 1998, Hafez Assad, the current president's father (who died in 2000), appointed a new chief of staff, who tried to press modern ideas on his officer corps, including an emulation of Israeli tactics. However, that fall, as tensions rose with Turkey over Assad's support of Kurdish guerrillas, the Syrian army (according to the [Middle East Intelligence Bulletin](#)) could not so much as deploy a serious fighting force on the Turkish border.

Syria's combat planes are pretty old, too—Soviet Sukhois and MiGs—and the pilots are trained badly, if at all. In 1982, Assad Sr. sent 90 of those planes into dogfights against the Israeli air force. The Israelis shot down all 90, the Syrians shot down zero. While they were at it, the Israeli pilots also managed to rip apart Syria's entire air-defense network.

There are no signs that the situation has improved since, either on the ground or in the air. From 1994-2001, according to Cordesman, the Syrians have received arms deliveries worth a mere \$700 million. (By comparison, Israel has received \$6.9 billion and Egypt \$9.1 billion.) In 2000, Tel Aviv University's Jaffe Center of Strategic Studies concluded, according to a summary in *Ha'aretz*, "that the strategic balance between Israel and Syria has never been so tilted in Israel's favor, and that Damascus has no real military option."

The Syrians do have three divisions of special forces, which have proved skilled in behind-the-lines action, and about 8,000 paramilitary gendarmes, who might be able to mount the sort of rear-guard assaults on U.S. supply lines that the Saddam Fedayeen pulled off in the Iraqi desert. However, the bottom line is that a couple of U.S. armored divisions, with a complement of air support, could break through to Damascus in little time.

Could Bush seriously be contemplating such a move? It's doubtful. Some of his house neocons see Iraq as the first in a series of Middle Eastern dominos to fall, but even they

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tend to theorize that Saddam's swift toppling will have a "[demonstration effect](#)" on his erstwhile allies, forcing them to "wake up" to the new geopolitical realities. It is also less than clear that Bush's soaring popularity could sustain a second round of war; certainly, he has not yet prepared the public for an invasion of Syria, as he set the stage over the course of a year for an assault on Iraq.

Still, if you're Bashar Assad, you've got to be noticing that, just as the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division and 1st Marine Expeditionary Force are preparing to go back home, the 4th Infantry and 1st Armor Divisions are starting to arrive. And while most of these troops will be tasked with establishing security in the new Iraq, might some of them—you've got to be asking—be sent on a little mission to the west?

But quite apart from the numerous political, economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian reasons for not plunging into a war on Syria, there is one military caveat as well—Syria really does have weapons of mass destruction, probably more than Iraq ever had, and its whole military strategy is geared to using them if necessary.

After the Israelis stripped bare the myth of Syrian defenses in 1982, Hafez Assad abandoned his goal of achieving "strategic parity" with Israel and instead aimed for "[strategic deterrence](#)." To that end, he built up huge stockpiles of biological and especially [chemical weapons](#)—including an arsenal of [missiles](#) with sufficient range to reach Israeli cities, as well as bombs and artillery shells to kill enemy troops on the battlefield. (This shift of doctrine and the resulting chemical buildup might be a source of solace for Bashar right now, but they also provide evidence that he knows how weak his conventional forces are; he knows that Dad pretty much [stopped competing](#) in that arena.)

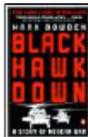
Hafez Assad received his first batch of chemical artillery shells as a gift from Egypt just before the Yom Kippur War in 1973. After that, he started buying them in quantity from the USSR and Czechoslovakia, though it's generally believed that the Soviets refused to help him set up his own production facilities. For that, he went shopping in China and North Korea. Until the early '90s, before export controls started tightening, he also bought chemical precursors from companies in France, Germany, Austria, Holland, and Switzerland (from the same firms that supplied Iraq). He started producing nerve gas in 1984 and was able to pack chemical weapons into missile warheads by the following year. The CIA estimates that Assad started deploying missiles with VX nerve gas in 1997. He is thought to possess 500 to 1,000 tons of chemical agents, including VX and sarin.

Syria is now believed to have several thousand chemical bombs, packed mainly with sarin, as well as 50-100 chemically tipped ballistic missiles, mainly Soviet-built SS-21s and Scuds. Assad bought Scud-B's, as well as the longer-range Scud-C's and -D's, from North Korea, which also provided the means for Syria to manufacture them.

There are reportedly four chemical-weapons production sites in Syria, though there may be more, since the Assads integrated this effort with the country's extensive commercial pharmaceutical industry. Intelligence analysts and their think-tank associates have written of underground bunkers and tunnels where chemical weapons are churned out and stored. It is hard to tell how much of this claim is true and how much is "threat-inflation," fostered by the Israelis, the Syrians, or both. (Each country has reason to exaggerate: Israel, to make the case for additional military aid; Syria, to deter a pre-emptive attack.)

If the United States were preparing an invasion of Syria, special operations forces would no doubt be scouring the areas around these suspected sites. The facilities would be bombarded the first night of the war. However, airstrikes might not destroy all the weapons—and if Syria retaliated, the results could be disastrous. In any case, it is no coincidence that the lab chiefs at Syria's [Scientific Studies and Research Center](#), which runs the country's weapons-of-mass-production program, have been holding their first [air-raid drills](#) lately. They, too, clearly have cause to be nervous.

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Fred Kaplan writes the "War Stories" column for *Slate*.
Photograph of a Syrian soldier by Ramzi Haidar/AFP Photo.

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Remark from the Fray:

What Fred Kaplan is saying, in a nutshell, is that Syria's military is now configured to wage war against civilians. It's "deterrent" is aimed at discouraging lethal retaliation from those nations the terrorists Syria supports operate against. I think the Bush administration's policy toward Syria right now is equal parts improvisation and bluff. American forces now in Iraq could crush the Syrian army and wipe out Syria's air force, but the United States has neither need nor desire to occupy more territory full of Arabs. Administration officials hope Syria can be crowded into giving up fleeing Iraqi Baath party members and preventing Hezbollah and the other charming groups now enjoying Syrian hospitality from crossing into Iraq. Syria may also be squeezed with respect to its chemical weapons arsenal, but lacking oil resources of its own the Syrian government can be squeezed harder with economic sanctions than Iraq's could. But the most important reason an American strike against Syria is unlikely is that it would divert American attention from the most serious external threat to Iraq's future stability, the Iranian mullahs. Shiite conservatives in Teheran are bound to seek to extend their influence into Iraq now that Saddam Hussein is gone, and this will be much easier to do if the American military is occupied elsewhere. They may also seek to keep the Kurdish region in Iraq's north unstable by supporting guerrilla attacks by the Ansar al-Islam gang expelled from Iraq late last month. Iran has the ability to make the postwar period turbulent and bloody. It is a potential threat; Syria is merely a potential nuisance.

--Zathras

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