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SYRIA'S REGIONAL ALIGNMENT:  
EXPLAINING SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY 1970-2010

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### SYRIA'S REGIONAL ALIGNMENT: EXPLAINING SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY 1970-2010

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Professor Eric Davis

What explains alignment behavior in Syrian foreign policy? Structural realists argue that, like all states, authoritarian states pursue their national interests in an anarchic world by balancing power or threats, informed by the distribution of material capabilities. Hence alliance choices, according to structural realists, are driven, necessarily, by regional threat assessments. Weak states in such an anarchic system, lacking ability to balance, would bandwagon with the powerful state. Liberals argue that domestic characters of states influence foreign policy behavior. Non-democratic states lack democratic institutions, which erodes the concept of “national interest”. Liberals therefore argue that authoritarian states’ foreign policies are irrational, unpredictable and driven by ideology geared solely towards regime survival. This dissertation motivates a resolution to this puzzle by arguing that Syria’s state national interest was defined through a foreign policy that dealt with the domestic

distributional dilemma, and simultaneously sought external security and regime survival. The alignment choices in Syrian foreign policy are best explained through a neoclassical realist approach that combines state and systemic level variables.

Decision-making process analysis of the political relevant elite in Syria will ground the dynamic that links state and systemic factors in a coherent rational foreign policy. This project worked towards testing the neo-classical realist theory of foreign policy in the Syrian case, and performing initial plausibility checks by examining Syrian foreign policy alignment choices between 1970 and 2010 through a number of case studies. Liberals fail to explain Syrian foreign policy behavior during the period in question, while neoclassical realism approach sheds more light on Syria's foreign policy behavior in general, and alignment choices in particular.

Methodologically, this project employs the historical analysis approach. Process tracing, in each case study, draws on elite interviews, local and regional press accounts, economic databases, military disputes data sets, memoirs, and U.S. National Security archives.

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## ***Dedication***

To Syria

May the world see you with eyes of love



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## ***Chapter One***

### **Introduction**

The Syrian crisis started in March 2011, within the same time frame as the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan uprisings. Whereas Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya underwent regime change within months following the conflicts, the Syrian government was able to withstand, and eventually push back against, internal and external political pressures. The political and economic survival of the Syrian state in 2014 was due, in large part, to its alliance with Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. While most Arab states strengthened their alliance with the United States during the post-WWII containment era, the Syrian government positioned itself as the stronghold for Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism. In contrast to Egypt's withdrawal from the Arab consensus in 1979, and the subsequent Camp David Peace agreement, Syria resisted piecemeal solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Syria refused to sign a separate peace deal with Israel, declining to subordinate its foreign policy to US and Western interests. This regional turning point in 1979 crystalized Syria's worldview. Iranians, in the same year, had deposed an important US ally, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. From that point on, Syria's foreign policy, along with Iran's, formed what regionally became known as the "resistance front." Why is an explanation of Syrian foreign policy and regional alliance behavior in the past forty years relevant? What knowledge can we gain about regional alliance behavior of non-democratic states from examining the Syrian case? The answer

surpasses the obvious of pointing out Syria's ability to constantly maneuver regionally and internationally, despite diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions carried out by the United States, US allies, and the European Union. In part, the answer lies in understanding foreign policy decision-making and the external and domestic determinants of alignment choices as a valuable contribution to research conducted on Middle Eastern foreign policy. This constitutes an important consideration, since interstate war between Middle Eastern states is less likely, and intrastate crisis, to varying degrees in Libya, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are fueled by tensions between regional alignments: Syria-Iran-Iraq-Hezbollah axis and the Gulf States-Turkey axis.

The answer to the previous questions also lies in recognizing that recent turbulence in Arab states, characterized as the "Arab Spring," or less romantically as a "political awakening," carries undertones of anti-policy-subordination to US and Western interests. Protesters in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen demanded democratic governance, free speech, economic reform, and free elections. They also demanded freedom from US and Western military, economic, and diplomatic dominance and intervention. Syrian foreign policy has exercised *resistance*, in the form of negotiating, subverting, and resisting American hegemony and Western influence in the Middle Eastern region, for over forty years.

Currently, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq, as well as General Abd al-Fattah al-Sissi in Egypt, manifest a trend of political independence and autonomous policy-making that is far removed from being categorized as supportive of a US or Western agenda in the Middle East. Both leaders express their country's respective

foreign policies in terms of national interests and are assertive in their selective engagement with great powers. Iraq and Egypt's foreign policy, as an expression of national interest, might converge with that of the United States on topics such as fighting terrorism. Yet both leaders have exercised an independent streak in policy making that might appear defiant to United States' agenda on other issues such as economic policies and military affiliations with China and Russia.

Historical precedents to this emerging autonomous foreign policy-making trend in the Middle East are few. Other than Syria, there are few examples including Egypt's foreign policy under Jamal Abdul Nasser, 1956–1970, Iran's foreign policy under the short premiership of Mohammad Mossadegh, 1951–1953, and Houari Boumediene's policy in Algeria in the 1970s, and Iran post-1979. This distinctive style of foreign policy is motivated by external threats and opportunities, nationalist agendas for economic development, and by an anti-imperialist stance.

### **The Motivation Behind this Project**

As theoretical approaches, neorealism and neoliberalism have both failed to account for and explain foreign policies and the alignment behavior of states such as Syria. The realist and liberal paradigms of international relations were established through post-1648 Peace of Westphalia European experiences. A number of scholars have addressed the dilemma of projecting Western analyses onto non-Western states, and have declared it problematic from the onset because it distorts and evades certain realities.<sup>1</sup> The assumption that political and economic

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<sup>1</sup> K. J. Holsti. *Why Nations Realign: Foreign Policy Restructuring in the Postwar World*. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Walt. *The Origins of Alliances*. (NY: Cornell Studies in Security Affairs, 1990).

integration (i.e., an institutional convergence toward Western liberal democracies and free market systems) leads to peaceful relations between states goes against mounting empirical evidence to the contrary.<sup>2</sup> The dynamic, Holsti explains in *Why Nations Realign*, is ingrained in the fact that cases of dependence and interdependence cause nationalistic behavior in foreign policy in order to (re)assert independence and autonomy.

Most theoretical applications have not examined foreign policy making in the Middle East. Steven Walt's book *The Origins of Alliances* was one of the few theoretical-based works that examined regional alignments in the Middle East between 1955 and 1979.<sup>3</sup> Walt, by drawing on Kenneth Waltz's work, tried to extend the system-level approach to explaining regional alignments in the Middle East. Walt referred primarily to the Western concept of security pacts. Here the limitations of structural explanations are due to the lack of explanatory power given to domestic- and state-level variables.

On the other hand, liberal theory is even more constrained when it attempts to explain foreign policies and the alliance behavior of states in the Middle East. The regime type of Middle Eastern states, which is by default authoritarian, with the exception of Turkey and Israel, has preoccupied liberal theorists solely in terms of the domestic politics of Middle Eastern states. Foreign policy decisions for Marc

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Walt. *The Origins of Alliances*. (NY: Cornell Studies in Security Affairs, 1990).



Lynch, for example, are motivated in Jordan by liberalization and the expansion of public spheres.<sup>4</sup>

Liberal theory, basing the prevalence of peace and predictable interstate relations on the existence of democratic institutions, has discounted foreign policy making in nondemocratic states as a regime survival strategy when applying the selectorate model in autocracies,<sup>5</sup> balancing between external and internal threats, or Omni-balancing, in third world countries,<sup>6</sup> and dealing with chronic internal economic turbulence.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have also explored the relation between domestic factors such as economic needs and regime stability in third world alignment formations.<sup>8</sup> The most cited explanatory variables in liberal theory are regime type and ideology.

Liberal theories of International Relations (IR) and structural theories do not capture the dynamism with which a Middle Eastern country, such as Syria, conducts its foreign policy. In contrast to most Arab states, Syrian foreign policy did not bandwagon<sup>9</sup> with the United States for economic and security purposes, nor was Syria's foreign policy irrational and adhering to a particular ideology.

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<sup>4</sup> Marc Lynch. *State Interests and Public Spheres*. (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Buena de Mesquita, Alistair Smith, Randolph Siverson, and James Morrow. *The Logic of Political Survival*. (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Steven David, "Explaining Third World Alignment." *World Politics* 43, (1991): 233–56.

<sup>7</sup> Fred H. Lawson. *Constructing International Relations in the Arab World*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Barnett and Jack Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignment." *International Organization* issue, 13 (1991): 369–395.

<sup>9</sup> Bandwagoning is a term popularized by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979). This realist concept predicts that weak states would rather align itself with

This work contends that Syria's foreign policy behavior and alignment choices represent Syria's response to a changing regional balance of power and threat perception, weighed by domestic political and economic considerations and informed by a general principle of resisting US and western intervention in the region. Due to the lack of military power (compared to Israel) and the lack of a hegemonic backing (from the United States), Syrian foreign policy is dependent on alignment maneuvers.

Weak states,<sup>10</sup> as discussed extensively in *Weak States in the International System* by Michael Held, are not helpless, but they can derive relative power from international maneuvering:<sup>11</sup> "much of the strength of the weak states is derivative rather than intrinsic. The diplomatic art of the weak state is to obtain, commit, and manipulate as far as possible, the power of other, more powerful states in their own interests" (Held, 1990, p. 257).<sup>12</sup> Syria's ability to maneuver and exert regional influence has been pointed out by a few scholars, like Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, who have tried to argue that Syria and Iran might be eligible for a regional middle power status (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 1997).<sup>13</sup>

This project will apply the neoclassical realist approach in order to understand the foreign policy behavior of Syria. Neoclassical realism combines

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the stronger state, than incur the cost of balancing it, because the cost of opposing the powerful state exceeds the benefit.

<sup>10</sup> Weak states have the following characters, as they are considered in Held: an underdeveloped weak state has a population between 20–30 million. Syria has 23 million (2002), and a GNP of 23 billion (2002).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Handel. *Weak States in the International System*. (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1990), p.275.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.p.275.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anush Ehteshami. *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*. (London: Routledge, 1997).

systemic considerations along with state-level factors. Historical process tracing explores the causal mechanism that connects external and domestic factors (independent variables) and alliance formation (dependent variables) through five case studies:

- The Syrian – Egyptian Alliance Leading up to the 1973 War.
- The Syrian – Iranian Alliance 1979 – 2010.
- Syria Joining the First Gulf War Coalition in 1990.
- The Syrian Alliance with Hezbollah 1982 – 2010.
- The Syrian Regime Security Crisis of 2003.

This project will further examine the decision-making processes and outcomes of the relevant elite in Syria between 1970 and 2010 in relation to the alignment decisions in the aforementioned case studies.

### **The Middle East and State Formation**

World War I and the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire initiated the origins of the state system in the Middle East. During the first half of the twentieth century, the task of conceptualizing national identities and building national institutions proceeded in parallel with ending foreign political and economic controls.<sup>14</sup>

It is precisely the rise of Arab nationalism and the nominal sovereignty in the Middle East under and post British and French mandates, two developments with often conflicting trajectories, that gave the Middle Eastern region distinct

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<sup>14</sup> Alan R. Taylor. *The Arab Balance of Power*. (NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982).

characteristics.<sup>15</sup> The political identities of the newly formed entities in the Middle East emerged, on the one hand, from the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, and on the other, the collapse of the imperial British and French order.<sup>16</sup>

The anarchic nature of the international arena that results from empire and imperial disintegration<sup>17</sup> produced a Hobbesian-like system in the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> The Middle East,<sup>19</sup> where “the character of the regional order is the product of its original external imposition and the collective interactions and conflicts of the states that contest or defend it over time”, is the starting point of this project. At the state level, government systems in Middle Eastern countries provide another point of contrast in the experience of the Middle Eastern region with that of Europe, the United States, and Latin America. During the time span identified in this project

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<sup>15</sup> Fred H. Lawson. *Constructing International Relations in the Arab World*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Michael Barnett. “Institutions, Roles, and Disorder: The Case of Arab State System.” *International Studies Quarterly*, 37 (1993): 271–296.

<sup>16</sup> Ghassan Salamé, ed. *The Foundations of the Arab State*. (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Michael Barnett. *Sovereignty, Nationalism and Regional Order in the Arab State System*. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996); M.E. Yapp. *The Near East Since the First World War*. (London: Longman, 1991); Avieli Roshwald. *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East 1914–1923*. (London: Routledge, 2001); Raymond Hinnebusch. *The International Politics of the Middle East*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Hendrik Spruyt. *The End of Empire?* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997). Jack Snyder. *Myths of Empire*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch. *The International Politics of the Middle East*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.9.

<sup>19</sup> In *New York Times*, “‘Near East’ is Mideast, Washington Explains.” Date: August 14, 1958. The United States’ State Department started to use Mideast, Middle East, and Near East interchangeably in 1958 (Retrieved 7/7/2012). The region referred to in this dissertation is the traditional Middle East area, in addition to North Africa or MENA. This region is also known as the “Greater Middle East” (first mentioned in the G8, 2004 summit). Countries included are: Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Somalia, and Mauritania.

(1970–2010), authoritarianism<sup>20</sup> as a regime type was a universal experience among Middle Eastern states, with the exception of Israel, Turkey, and Lebanon. The following table illustrates this phenomena through a sample of eight ME countries.

Table 1.1 **Middle Eastern Countries and Regime Types**

State	Independence	Political Parties	Time of Existence	Regime Type
Syria	1946	Socialists Arab SSPS Communists Muslim Brotherhood Baathists	1963–2014	Authoritarian
Tunisia	1956	Neo-Distour	1956–2011	Authoritarian
Iraq	1932	Nasirists Ba'ath Communists Ahrar Istiqlal National Democratic Itihad al Watani Sha'b	1968–2003	Authoritarian
Yemen	1967	National Liberation Front	1967–2011	Authoritarian
Algeria	1962	Front de Liberation National	1962–present	Authoritarian
Egypt	1936	Watani Wafd Liberal Constitutionalists Saadists Independent Wafdist bloc Ittihad	1952–2011	Authoritarian
Morocco	1956	UNFP Istiqlal	1965–2012	Authoritarian

<sup>20</sup> Authoritarianism defined as a state system in which a single power holder, either a dictator or small group of politically relevant elite or both, monopolize political power.

		PDI Liberal Independents Movement Populaire		
Jordon	1946	Communists Baathists Muslim Brotherhood Arab Constitutionalists	1957–present	Authoritarian

This project concurs that the anarchic nature of the state system in the Middle East, particularly the security dilemma and rivalry that erupted between Middle Eastern states during the Cold War era, would prioritize systemic level variables and a realist approach. This project also recognizes, however, that the unique state formation, evolution of nationalism and sovereignty, economic development challenges, and the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East grant explanatory power to state- and individual-level variables. This project holds the position, unlike the liberal approach, that the lack of democratic institutions does not contradict the existence of national interest and rational motivations in foreign policy behaviors and alliance formations.

### **State Formation in Syria**

State formations in the Middle East were intertwined organically with the collapse of the French and British mandates in the region. The political independence period, 1946 for Syria, immortalized the historical congruency of the nation-state's birth and the departure of Western colonialism from the Middle East.

This part of the chapter will highlight the significance of historical memory.<sup>21</sup> The prevailing political culture and collective identity in Syria was not only historically affected by French mandate legacies, the Arab revolt, or the creation of the state of Israel, but that historical memory was reinforced and shaped by the educational system, the media, and general political discourse after independence and more acutely after 1970, when Ba'th party influence in society became more acute. Generations of Syrians grew up on associating US and western interferences in the region with colonial legacies that have deprived Arab states from true political and economic independence. The collective identity of Syrians resented Western interference and dominance in the Middle Eastern region.

This project does not account directly for historical memory, ideational, cultural, and identity factors. It does, however, assume that systemic-, state-, and individual-level factors such as the perception of regional threats, state foreign policy, economic policies, and decision-making processes qualify for an aggregate outlet where ideational, cultural tendencies, and past experiences shape future political preferences.

Historic Syria, under King Faisal I of the Hashemite dynasty in 1920, was a kingdom spanning from the Tauris mountain of Turkey in the north to the Sinai desert of Egypt in the south. During the Hashemite kingdom 1918-1920, Syria at the time included Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. The kingdom was put under French mandate as imposed on the region after the Sykes–Picot agreement in 1916. French and Arab forces clashed in the battle of Maysalun in 1920, after which historic Syria

<sup>21</sup> Eric Davis. *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*. (California: University of California Press, 2005).

was divided during the San Remo conference. Contemporary Syria and Lebanon were placed under French mandatory control, while Palestine and Transjordan fell under a British Mandate. Sultan Pasha al-Atrash led a revolt against the French from Druze Mountain in the south of Syria in 1925. The revolution against the French engulfed all of Syria, and by 1936, Syrians and the French authority were negotiating a treaty of independence. The French legislature, however, refused to ratify it.

Syria came under the control of the Vichy government in 1941, the same year Syria declared its independence from imperialist France. The international community recognized Syria as an independent state on January 1, 1944. Syrian nationalists continued to press the remaining French troops to leave, and the last of these forces left on April 17, 1946. A number of scholars emphasize this historic juncture in Syria's history to delineate the origins of nationalist, and anti-imperialist streak in Syria's foreign policy.<sup>22</sup>

Syria took part in the Arab–Israeli war of 1948 along with other Arab states. The Arab defeat ensued, and the Syrian troops retreated from Palestine to the Golan Heights. The significance of that defeat and the subsequent disappointment, shame and sense of loss and confusion rippled throughout Syrian society, affecting the political legitimacy of Syria's leaders for decades to come. The period between 1948 and 1956 was particularly turbulent. Arab defeatism reignited anti-imperialist memories, where Israel was seen as the benefactor of British and later American support. The first coup d'état in Syria and the Arab world after WWII was directly

<sup>22</sup> Zaine N. Zaine. *The Struggle for Arab Independence*. (Beirut: Khayats, date).  
A.L. Tibawi. *A Modern History of Syria*. (London: MacMillan, 1969).



linked to the defeat in the 1948 war. The Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, with constituents concentrated in the military and rural communities, was founded in 1947. The Ba'th Party increasingly delegitimized Syrian leadership on the basis of Arab nationalism and efforts to liberate Palestine. Parliamentary institutions became weaker, and the military establishment gained the upper hand in Syrian politics. The trend of consecutive coups, beginning in April 1949, continued until the 1970 coup of Air force Colonel Hafez al-Asad.

This project contends that the effect of Arab defeatism after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war culminated in an ever-increasing radical belligerent foreign policy between 1948 and 1970. This foreign policy increasingly opposed to the West and its allies in the region, and indiscriminately supportive of leftist- and communist-leaning efforts to aid Palestinian guerrillas and the liberation of Palestine. This radicalized position, in turn, dominated the orientation of Syrian foreign policy between 1949 and 1970 and started to threaten the very existence and security of the state. The aim of Syrian foreign policy in 1970, and thereafter, during Hafez al-Asad's reign, was directly intended to offset this trend.

## **Purpose of the Study**

### Research Questions

This project will address the following main and sub-questions:

Main Question:

What explains the alignment behavior in Syrian foreign policy between 1970 and 2010?

Sub-Questions:

- 1- How did Syria mitigate its internal and external security dilemmas?
- 2- How did Syria's management and maintenance of domestic consolidation provide the necessary tools for an autonomous foreign policy?
- 3- How did the alignment choices provide an external focal point to enhance national identity?
- 4- Why does the *resistance* principle in foreign policy making in Middle Eastern states result in a popular foreign policy?

The last question is treated in greater depth in the concluding chapter, in which the project's findings are utilized to illuminate the role of resisting western influence evident in Middle Eastern foreign policy-making post-2011.

### **Hypotheses**

- *Null hypothesis*: Syrian alignment choices are the result of Syrian decision makers' reactions to the external security environment, after taking into account domestic economic and security considerations.
- *Alternative hypothesis 1*: Syrian alignment choices are ideological, adhering to Ba'ath Party ideology and Alawi sect interests serving the sole purpose of regime survival.
- *Alternative hypothesis 2*: Syrian alignment choices are congruent with bandwagoning, the realist prediction for weak states.

The null hypothesis states that the Syrian decision-making elite detected a change in the regional security environment, particularly the signing of the Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, Saddam Hussein's takeover in Iraq, and the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, all of which transpired in 1979. At the same time, the Syrian decision maker evaluated the domestic political environment

and considered the rise of radical militant Islamists, economic development needs and regime security. While also taking into account Syrian involvement in the Lebanese civil war during this era, aligning with the Islamic Republic of Iran became a rational option for the Syrian decision maker. The particular causal mechanism linking the external and internal factors with the alignment decision with Iran is explained in detail in chapter five. The null hypothesis will test the suitability of the neo-classical realism model in explaining the alignment behavior of Syria. The external environment is the predominant independent variable, while domestic variables such as regime security, economic needs, and allusions of submission to Israeli and American demands become crucial in sorting out possible alignments that are politically acceptable to the Syrian decision maker. The intervening variable, regime security, has two functions. First, it is the sufficient condition facilitating the alignment of Syria between 1970 and 2010. Second, regime security is key to the falsification test of the null hypothesis. An extreme case of a regime security threat is represented by the case of the international pressure exerted on the Syrian regime in 2003, categorized as “existential” by Syrian officials, during which the international community initiated a worldwide campaign to isolate Syria and force a withdrawal of Syrian military troops and its security apparatus from Lebanon in accordance with UN resolution 1559 (2004). Internally, the Damascus Spring that started in 2000 was mobilizing an ever-increasing civil society that demanded political freedoms. These external and internal security threats did not prompt any realignment maneuvers by the Syrian government. In fact, Syrian

foreign policy moved from a defensive stance to an offensive position by supporting Hezbollah during the Israeli war in Lebanon in the following year in 2006.

Neoclassical realism theory<sup>23</sup> emphasizes, in addition to systemic variables, the explanatory power of a number of independent internal variables such as economic and internal security needs. The long tenor of the Syrian decision-making elite, Hafez al-Assad (president from 1970–2000), Abdul Halim Khaddam (1970–2004), Faruq al-Shara (1980–2010), Bashar al-Assad (2000–2010), Walid al Mualem (1990–2010), Butheina Shaban (1990–2010), Ali Mamluk (1990, 2010), and many others who form the inner circle of the main decision-makers in Syria, is a reasonable foundation for studying the decision-making process and the outcomes of the decision-making elite.

This research will integrate Poliheuristic theory, which asserts that the decision makers undergo a two-stage decision making process. The theory assumes complexity of the decision-making environment and that the decision maker uses dimension-based decision strategies with the non-compensatory rule evolving around the political dimension.<sup>24</sup> Poliheuristic theory retains the inclusive capacity of handling and accounting for both cognitive and rational factors of decision-making. During the first stage, alternatives are rejected based on unacceptable dimensions to the decision maker, usually a political dimension (i.e., resistance

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<sup>23</sup> Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998); Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Alex Mintz and Car DeRaun. *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Alex Mintz. *Integrating Cognitive and Rational Theories of Decision Making*. (Location: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

principle, regime security). In this first stage, the decision maker uses cognitive heuristics to sort out acceptable alternatives. In the second stage, the decision maker employs rational thinking to maximize benefits and minimize risks by choosing the best alternative from the remaining acceptable alignment choices. It is important to highlight two aspects, one is the political constraints under which the decision-maker is operating at the first stage. Second, the limited resources available to the decision-maker once he arrived at political acceptable alignment choices at the second stage.

### **Methodology**

Methodologically, the study is predominantly qualitative. Historical process tracing, in each of the five case studies, will explore the causal mechanism, through which the decision-maker arrives at an alignment decision, drawing on elite interviews, local and regional press accounts, economic databases, military dispute datasets, memoirs, and US National Security archives. The proposed case studies will span the period of 1970 to 2010 and will include two decision-making styles: that of President Hafez al-Asad (1970–2000), and his son President Bashar al-Asad (2000–2010). Time in this sense is conceptually ingrained in the framework of the null hypothesis. This is in contrast to both the alternative hypothesis that emphasize bandwagoning and ideology, which are conceptually less contingent on time, regional context, and the sequence of events.

The case study approach will emphasize the structured focused comparative approach,<sup>25</sup> in which standard questions about the role of independent variables are asked in each case.

Case studies, or small N studies, have the advantage over large N studies in that they focus on analytic depth and emphasize interpretive and descriptive pathways between cause and effect. The causal mechanism, in other words, connects the independent variables and the intervening variable with the dependent variable, thereby exploring the alignment choice in depth. The construct validity of case studies, in this sense, is derived from the possibility of including a diverse set of causal factors to represent the theoretical concept and validate a causal inference.<sup>26</sup>

This project handled case selection in a manner that appreciated the pitfalls of selection bias and the limited number of cases within the target population: cases of Syrian interstate relations, that resulted in an alliance formation between 1970 and 2010. The case selection process arrived at a representative sample and a useful variation, while remaining sensitive to the theoretical interests of the null and alternative hypothesis.

*The Five Case Studies:*

- The Syrian–Egyptian alliance leading up to the 1973 war
- The Syrian–Iranian alliance 1979–2010

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander George. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Science*. (Location: Belfour Center, Harvard University, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Lisa Given. *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. (CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 69.

- Syria joining the First Gulf War coalition in 1990
- The Syrian alliance with Hezbollah 1990–2010
- The Syrian Regime's security crisis of 2003

At the end of each case study, this project will highlight the strategic interaction in a competitive international environment that resulted in a certain alignment choice. Borrowing game theory logic, this project will identify the maximized utility of each alignment choice by evaluating the strategy exercised by the Syrian decision-maker who is holding a consistent belief of resisting American hegemony. This approach is valuable because it considers counterfactual cases that actors use when reaching decisions, judging the other side's likely responses, the opponent's resolve, and possible expected benefit from backing down.

#### **Four Standard Questions for Each Case Study**

- External Environment: How did Syria's security needs and external threat perception of Israel and Arab states affect the alliance choice in each case?
- Internal Consolidation: How did consolidation between the business community, the military, and maintaining support of the bureaucracy require a shift in alignment in each case? How did the preference of the merchants and economic development needs dictate the choice of alignment in each case?
- How did a possible analogy to submission to Israel and America's preferences narrow the choice of alignment in each case?
- How did the decision maker sort through available alliance choices at the time?

#### **Key Concepts**

**Alliance:** According to Walt “an alliance is a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states”.<sup>27</sup> This project uses the term “alliance” to convey the informal aspect of alliance formation implied by Walt, and furthermore highlights the coalition-making aspect within which decision makers of two sovereign states coordinate strategies to realize an outcome. Between the balance of power and collective security equilibrium debates, this project takes the position that balance of power is a more appropriate characterization of contemporary affairs in the Middle East.

**Alignment:** According to Snyder alignment is “an expectation of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions.”<sup>28</sup> An alliance adds precision and formality to collaborative arrangements between sovereign states. Snyder further adds that “What we really want to understand is the broader phenomena of alignments of which explicit alliance is merely a subset”.<sup>29</sup> It is common in academic literature to use the terms: alliance, alignment, and coalition interchangeably.<sup>30</sup> This project will make the distinction between alliance and alignment according to Snyder’s categorization.

**Security:** States use different criteria to assess what constitutes threats or danger, and states have different security expectations.<sup>31</sup> Security in this sense is not just the study of threats but also the study of which threats can be tolerated and which

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Walt. *The Origins of Alliances*. (NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Glenn H. Snyder. *Alliance Politics*. (NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Don Ward. *Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics*. (Texas: Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver, 1982), p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Arnold Wolfers. “National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol.” *Political Science Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1952); 481–502.



threats require swift action.<sup>32</sup> National security is the survival of a state, and, more specifically, national security means freedom from foreign dictates.

**Political Economy:** The study of the relation between a state's production, wealth, government, and distribution of national income.

**Resistance:** Resistance is counter-hegemonic. This project will explore the attempt of negotiating, subverting, and resisting American hegemony in Syrian foreign policy making. Furthermore, this project will shed some light on the principled alliance or resistance front between Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria.

**Strategy:** Strategy refers to the national interest serving plans mobilized by the state through its foreign policy to safeguard and achieve desired goals.

The second chapter will explore the various explanatory models available that are suited to provide alternative explanations for Syria's alignment choices. This chapter will provide an overview of the existing literature in the field and situate the proposed alternative explanation as a useful contribution, filling the gap created by the two major IR paradigms. The third chapter will delineate and explain the suitability of the particular theoretical framework chosen and the methodology pursued in this research. Chapter four, five, six, seven, and eight present the five case studies. The ninth chapter will analyze the results and suggest further research avenues.

Alexander George best describes the motivator behind this research:

"Practitioners believe they need to work with actor-specific models that grasp the different internal structures and behavior patterns of each state and leader with

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<sup>32</sup> Barry Buzan. *Change and Insecurity Reconsidered, Critical Reflection on Security and Change*. (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000).

which they must deal” (George 1993, 9).<sup>33</sup> This common-sense position describing the need for practitioners is the underlying commitment of this project. This research will try to offer an operational actor-specific analysis of Syrian foreign policy. By dissecting the systemic environment, state formation, state domestic environment, and leadership decision making, this study will provide a comprehensive and in-depth look at the factors that motivated the Syrian decision maker to shift or forge alignments in a given manner and at a specific time. This project is less concerned with going against the grain of the conventional wisdom regarding authoritarian states’ foreign policy behavior that has been and remains a source of doubt and suspicion in Western academic literature. This study is very committed to peeling away the layers of what determined alliance choices at specific times for Syria, a Middle Eastern state that, historically and in the present-day, defies Western explanation and predictions.

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander George. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Science*. (Massachusetts: Belfour Center, Harvard University, 2005), p.9.

## ***Chapter Two***

### **Foreign Policy and Regional Alignment**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines how the neoclassical realist approach not only relates to the existing literature in the field, but is also better suited to fill the gap created by the two international relations paradigms, neorealism and liberalism, in their attempts to explain alignment behavior of weak nondemocratic states. Furthermore, by placing decision-making literature in the larger context of alignment behavior of non-democratic states, this chapter will argue that Polyheuristic theory is a critical component in understanding foreign policy behavior in authoritarian states.

Literature sources include selected representative scholarly articles and books.

This chapter is conceptually organized and divided into three sections. In the first section, I discuss neorealist theories that have influenced my understanding of the regional environment that prevails in the Middle East. Under the structural realist umbrella, while appreciating the variation that exists within realism, I will start by including three theories—balance of power, balance of threat, and balance of interest theories—with a critical review of the various attempts to utilize them when explaining the foreign policy behavior of Middle Eastern states. Further

revisions of the balance of threat theory, with particular focus on revisionist states, are also examined.

In the second section, I include the liberal approach's explanation of foreign policy behavior in non-democratic states through regime type, ideology, and state characteristics formation. To start, this section will focus on foreign policy behavior explanations prioritizing domestic factors such as ideology, regime survival, and economic needs. This section further lays out the various explanations refuting the rationality of non-democratic states based on domestic weaknesses and subordination of foreign policy making. The third section places decision-making theories within the larger context of understanding foreign policy behavior in general and the critical role that individual-level analysis and decision-making theories play in understanding alignment decisions in authoritarian states in particular. The general format of the review moves between the dyadic and the monadic realm of foreign policy making in Middle Eastern states and in Syria. In the end I argue that none of these theories and approaches provides a satisfactory explanation for the Syrian alignment choices in the case studies examined.

### **Structural Theories and Foreign Policies of Arab States:**

In this section I review existing literature that focuses on systemic factors, outlining their assumptions and their presumptive expectations regarding the alignment behavior of Middle Eastern states.

#### ***Balance of Power Theory***

This theory holds particular prominence, not only as part of an international relations paradigm, but also in the understanding of Middle East regional politics.

L. Carl Brown (1984)<sup>34</sup> describes the regional impact of the global system as a particular version of power balancing and deems it the “Near Eastern Game.” Drawing on the insights of Thucydides, who famously notes, “The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must” (431 BC, Melian Dialogue, Book 5 chapter 17), realists have worked toward a predictive falsifiable theory of international relations, where weak states stand at the receiving end of the interplay of power politics.

There are three basic assumptions binding neorealist theories.<sup>35</sup> The first assumption is that states are rational unitary actors existing in an anarchic self-help system. Second, all states have similar, yet conflicting preferences; they are either seeking security or seek to increase their power.<sup>36</sup> The third assumption is that the distribution of material capability among states in the international system is the main factor that differentiates powerful states from weak states. Hence, the key is to quantify how much power a state possesses and how many poles are in the system. Kenneth Waltz (1979), the founder of structural realism, created the balance of power theory based on the assumptions stated above. Waltz contends that weaker states will bandwagon with a stronger power because the cost of

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<sup>34</sup> L. Carl Brown, *International Politics of the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?” *International Security* 24, no. 2 (DATE):5–55.

Robert O. Keohane, *Neorealism and its Critics*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

Richard Mansbach and John A. Vasquez, *In Search of Theory, a New Paradigm in World Politics* (Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>36</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *Structural Realism in International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. T. Dunne, M. Kurki, and S. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 75-77.

opposing a stronger state exceeds the benefit. This theory articulates a clear linear prediction as to the predicted behavior of weaker states in the anarchic international system. Waltz (1979), however, tries to discount the relevance of the balance of power theory as a predictor of state behavior by stating that it is an international relations theory and not a theory of foreign policy (71–73, 121–123).<sup>37</sup> As indicated by the number of scholars, there is no logical reason to prevent a systemic theory from explaining foreign policy behavior of individual states.<sup>38</sup> John Mearsheimer (2001) further indicates that his theory of offensive realism would explain both international outcomes and foreign policies of individual states.<sup>39</sup> Waltz's expectation for the alignment behavior of Middle Eastern states would lead to the conclusion that Syria would bandwagon with the United States after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The United States backed Israel's action, and Israel's first Lebanon war, Operation Peace for Galilee, that directly challenged the Syrian presence in Lebanon and the presence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). What unfolded was a tactical shift by Syrian authorities who switched their alliance from the Maronites, who supported Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, to Amal and later to the newly conceived Hezbollah organization, all in order to maintain the initial strategy of opposing the most powerful regional state, namely Israel, that was backed by the United States. Post-1979, when the Soviet Union, a traditional patron of Syria, was on a downward spiral and

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<sup>37</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1979).

<sup>38</sup> Mariam F. Elman, "The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard," *British Journal of Political Science* 25 (1995):171–217.

<sup>39</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011).

economically and militarily exhausted, the United States and its regional allies, Israel and the Gulf states, were backing and supporting Iraq's Saddam Hussein against Iran and funding the Mujahedeen against the Soviet Union. The United States and its regional allies were clearly the most powerful, but Syria aligned with the weak Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. This political, economic, and security alliance endured the test of time and became crucial to Syria's current crisis. The prediction of bandwagoning does not endure in the Syrian case.

### ***Balance of Threat Theory***

Another prominent theory that expanded the notion of balance among states is Stephen Walt's (1987) theory that states balance against the greatest threat even if that state might not be the most powerful (263).<sup>40</sup> Walt accounted for states' perceptions and intentions in addition to material capability, existing power structures, and geographic proximity. Walt's (1987) interpretation of why Arab states did not bandwagon with Israel during the Cold War is that it posed the greatest threat to their existence, which in turn propelled Arab solidarity against Israel (265). Walt's theory has been criticized by a number of International Relations (IR) scholars who recognized that his theory is un-falsifiable. Walt argues that both bandwagoning and balancing are consistent with his theory, a point criticized by Miriam Elman (1995, 177) when she points out that, if a small state decides to bandwagon, balance of threat theory scores a point because it can point out a threat in its geographic proximity. If a small state chooses to balance, Walt argues that balancing is a strategic first choice even if the state is a candidate for

<sup>40</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

bandwagoning (Elman 1995, 177). In this sense, Walt's theory can justify any alliance *post hoc*, but it cannot produce an *a priori* expectation of alliance behavior in specific cases. Furthermore, Gregory Gause (2004) points out that the perception of intent, the explanatory variable in Walt's theory (along with "threat"), or how states perceive threats, is undetermined because that threat perception is highly controversial (i.e., subjective and contingent among decision-makers) (273), and therefore not at all obvious.

Walt's (1987) theory of states balancing against the greatest threat cannot clearly explain a number of Syrian foreign policy decisions cases, one of which is the existential threat of 2003 during the Bush administration, which intensified after the 2005 assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Syria conducted a dual strategy; one was to absorb the impact of UN Security Council resolution 1559 by completing its troop withdrawal from Lebanon. Syria supported Hezbollah during the war with Israel in the summer of 2006, after which Hezbollah was officially inducted into the Lebanese parliament and Lebanese politics in general. Second, Syria engaged in indirect peace talks with Israel in 2007, an initiative consistently advocated by the United States. It is not clear that perception of threat by the Syrian decision makers led to balancing against the United States. Still, the prediction of bandwagoning did not materialize in this case.

Birthe Hansen (2001) proposed a structural realist model for the unipolar world to explain the political dynamic of alliance formation in the Middle East that emerged in the post-1989 era. Since Unipolarity proved to be more durable than predicted, Hansen predicts that Middle Eastern states will balance against threats



from other states in the region by aligning with the sole great power. According to Hansen (2001), *flocking* to the United States, the sole superpower after the Cold War, is the primary alignment dynamic of the Middle East (65–67).<sup>41</sup> Hansen's predictions are particularly problematic in the Syrian case. Syria went into hyper-defiance mode against U.S. policy in the Middle East, both in rhetoric and in foreign policy behavior, after the Iraq invasion in 2003. Hansen's prediction might have concluded that Syria would not defy the United States during the Israel war with Hezbollah in 2006, or that Syria would sever its ties with Iran and Hamas. The events that unfolded after the famous ultimatum speech of Gen. Colin Paul, the US Secretary of State at the time, in Damascus in 2003, however, proved that the Syrian decision-maker alliance maneuvers contradicted Hansen's prediction on every level. Syria did not sever its ties with Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah, and furthermore supported its regional ally, Hezbollah, during the 2006 Hezbollah war with Israel. Syria had a leading role later on in the Doha conference in 2008, that increased Hezbollah's stake in Lebanese parliament, which in turn solidified Hezbollah influence in Lebanese politics.

### ***Balance of Interests Theory***

Randall Schweller (1994) contends that states do indeed have different preferences. He divides states between *status quo* states and revisionist states. *Status quo* states work toward preserving the existing order and seek security and balance accordingly. Revisionist states seek power and balance to change and overthrow the *status quo*. Schweller (1994) further divides *status quo* states

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<sup>41</sup> Birthe Hansen, *Unipolarity and the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001).

between lions and lambs: lions, those states that are powerful *pro-status quo* and lambs, the weak *pro-status quo* states that bandwagon with the lions. Revisionist states are divided between wolves and jackals: the strong dissatisfied and the weak dissatisfied who appear at sight of victory to share the spoils (Schweller 1994, 101-104).<sup>42</sup> Schweller leaves the door wide open as to what determines state preferences in the first place, before states adopt a particular policy. According to Schweller's characterization of states, Syria would be in the jackal category. Since Syria is a jackal state, weak and dissatisfied, it would join at the dawn of victory to share the spoils. Syria's foreign policy maneuvers since 1970 have mostly been counterintuitive to Schweller's logic of balance of interest theory. While Syria's ally Iran could be considered a revisionist state along with Hezbollah as a non-state actor, conversely, Syria joined the U.S. coalition of the first Gulf War early on and contributed 40,000 troops to the war efforts. Syria initiated the 1973 Yom Kippur War along with Egypt. Syria aligned with Jordan between 1975 and 1979, even though Jordan is a lamb, a *pro-status quo* country. Furthermore, the strategic implications and the direction of foreign policy that are associated with certain structuring and alignment choices cannot be fully discerned from Schweller's assessment. Questions arise: "Is the state attempting to isolate, self-rely, depend, or diversify its regional position?"; "How can we assess the motivations, determinants, and end game of a certain alignment move?"; "What is the regional objective of a

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<sup>42</sup> Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72-107.

certain alignment choice?" These inquiries call for taking a closer look at state-level variables.

### **Liberal Theories and Foreign Policy of Middle East States**

In this section of the chapter, I will evaluate the various liberal approaches to explaining foreign policy behavior of non-democratic states, highlighting mainly domestic and ideological factors governing the alignment behavior of Middle Eastern states.

### ***Authoritarianism and Foreign Policy Making***

Authoritarianism in the Middle East has been a constant regional feature since the 1950s, with the exception of Israel, Turkey and Lebanon. Centralized decision making among a small circle of officials is a norm rather than an anomaly in the Middle East. Rather than exploring venues of incorporating this feature of Middle Eastern foreign policy making into the systemic analysis, liberal scholars have addressed authoritarianism and the resulting foreign policies from the standpoint of authoritarianism's being a case-by-case domestic variable distorting how foreign policy *should* be made. Freedom House ratings from 1975 to 2005 for Middle East and North African (MENA) countries show a consistency of "not Free" among these countries. In fact, Freedom House reports show that, in 2005, Middle East countries were similar to what they were in 1975, with the exception of Israel.

Yet the constant effort among liberal scholars has been to cast Middle Eastern states as a set of null cases and outliers. I argue that authoritarianism in the Middle East is an aggregate variable with clear systemic implications in the region, a feature that needs to be addressed as a regional norm. Only from this standpoint, I argue, can the real drivers of foreign policy-making in individual Middle East countries be accounted for adequately.

In liberal literature, third world foreign policy is essentially *irrational*, primarily because of domestic weaknesses, which subordinates foreign policy making to resolve internal power struggles. Accordingly, effective autonomous foreign policy decision-making is an oxymoron in third world states that lack legitimacy, democratic institutions, and popular support. According to Goode (1962), foreign policy in third world countries is recruited to the task of state building. In this sense, foreign policy is utilized against the heterogeneity of society to generate loyalty to the regime.<sup>43</sup> In the dramatic actor model, states that lack real capabilities deploy an anti-imperialist foreign policy as a substitute for the delivery of real economic benefits and political rights. Furthermore, regimes exaggerate or create external threats to blind their citizens to internal troubles (Calvert 1986; Dawisha 1988).<sup>44</sup> Lacking capability does not square well with the military capability of the Syrian army. With 408,000 soldiers, the Syrian army is the fourth largest military in the Middle East, after Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. Syria has the

<sup>43</sup> Robert Goode, "State Building as a Determinant of Foreign Policy in the New States," in *Neutrality and Non-alignment*, ed. Laurence and Martin (New York: Praeger, 1962).

<sup>44</sup> Peter Calver, *The Foreign Policy of New States* (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, 1988). Adee Dawisha, "Syria under Asad 1970–1978," *The Centers of Powers, Government and Opposition* 13, no. 3 (1978):341–354.

second largest combat aircraft capability, with 591 aircraft, after only Israel, and the second largest number of Main Battle tanks, with 4,500 tanks, only after Turkey.<sup>45</sup>

The role of ideology in foreign policy has been used in two ways. First, ideology is an extension of sovereign societies and their basic values formulated in their foreign policies. In this sense, democratic states have one type of foreign policy, and authoritarian states have another type of foreign policy.<sup>46</sup> Ole R. Holsti (1977) compares this line of thought to scholars who are *hard-liners*, attributing Soviet and Chinese foreign policy to Marxism-Leninism and communist totalitarianism. Holsti (1977) further criticizes scholars who regard ideology, described as institutional requirements for capitalism, as a sufficient explanation of foreign policy (22).<sup>47</sup> Second, and most important, ideology has been used as a causal explanatory variable. In this sense, scholars have used ideology to explain and describe the substance, sources, process, and outcome of foreign policy (Carlsnaes 1986).<sup>48</sup> If foreign policy is seen as an ideological phenomenon, its goals, objectives, and purposes are also linked to ideology. The term becomes hollow because it is implied even when such theoretical determinism is not specified (Holsti 1977). Many authors have ascribed ideological foreign policy to some states but not to others. Stanley Hoffman (1968) states that they deploy an ideological foreign

<sup>45</sup> These numbers are from 1993. They are the most accurate for the purposes of this analysis because 1993 is the approximate middle between 1970 and 2010, the time line covered by this project.

<sup>46</sup> Kenneth Thompson and Roy Macridis, "The Comparative Study of Foreign Policy," in *Foreign Policy in World Politics*, ed. Roy Macridis (Englewood Cliffs, 1972).

<sup>47</sup> Ole R. Holsti, "Foreign Policy Decision Makers Viewed Psychologically: Cognitive Process Approaches," in *Thought and Action in Foreign Policy*, eds. G. Mathew Bonham and Michael J. Shapiro (Basel, 1977).

<sup>48</sup> Walter Carlsnaes, *Ideology Foreign Policy: Problems of Comparative Conceptualization* (Basil: Blackwell, 1986).

policy are usually revisionists' states that are unsatisfied with the *status quo* and want to "push the hands of the clock forward or backward". Therefore, he notes that the "United States is not an ideological nation, and its policies are not ideological."<sup>49</sup> Within an output model, ideology becomes an independent variable that explains states' patterns of behavior. Hadley Bull (1977) explains that ideologies are the cause of conflict and major wars.<sup>50</sup> The question then becomes, "Is ideology capable of being an input variable, explaining the process of foreign policy and the outcome of foreign policy?" If so, ideology suffers not only from semantic and conceptual problems as an explanatory variable, but also from methodological and philosophical ramifications (Carlsnaes 1986, 15). Walid Phares (1992) argues that Syria is driven by a revisionist ideology, which results in an irrational foreign policy that seeks the annexation of Lebanon, the destabilization of modern pro-western regimes, and the destruction of Israel (79).<sup>51</sup> Phares also attempts to apply ideology as a sufficient explanatory variable to explain the motives, process, and outcome of Syrian foreign policy.

There have been a number of attempts made to explain away the foreign policies of Middle Eastern states in a "lump-sum" fashion. Mark Haas's (2012) recent work singles out ideology as the primary factor motivating the foreign

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<sup>49</sup> Stanley Hoffman, *Gulliver's Troubles: Or the Setting of American Foreign Policy*. (New York, 1968)

Stephen Kirby, "National Interests vs. Ideology in American Diplomacy," in *Knowledge and Belief in Politics*, ed. Robert Benewick (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973).

<sup>50</sup> Hadley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London, 1977).

<sup>51</sup> Walid Phares, "The Syria-Iran Axis and the Mideast's Future," *Global Affairs* 7 (1992): 28-91.

policies of Middle Eastern states as diverse as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.<sup>52</sup> Singling out ideology as the sufficient variable to explain foreign policy behavior is analogous to pointing to a black box within which anything and everything can be explained. This leads the observer back to the starting point: Does ideology explain anything at all? Considering this line of thought, Ba’thists ideology of *Unity, Liberty, Socialism* and pan-Arabism would be sufficient to explain the diverse objectives such as alignment with Iran, joining the international coalition to liberate Kuwait in 1991, and aligning with Hezbollah. From this standpoint, ideology does not have explanatory capacity and cannot be the only explanatory variable.

Daniel Pipes (1990), using the domestic politics model, attributes foreign policy making in Syria to the need of sectarian rule for irredentist ideology to deflect attention from internal oppression.<sup>53</sup> The foreign policies of non-conformist states such as the Soviet Union, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela were, at different times in history, discounted as irrational by Western scholars, who made the assertion that domestically generated ideological commitments that oppose U.S. interests are irrational foreign policy motivators.<sup>54</sup> Pipes (1990) further describes expansionist aspirations in Syrian foreign policy under Hafez al-Assad, saying that Assad was “playing a double game” in which Alawi’s aspirations and a strong ideological tendency to achieve a Greater Syria were replacing pan-Arabism with pan-

<sup>52</sup> Mark Haas, *The Clash of Ideologies, Middle Eastern Politics and American Security*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>54</sup> This trend was started with George Keenan’s report from the Soviet Union in 1947, when he described foreign policy making in the USSR as deeply flawed, irrational, and dangerous because of the opposing ideological orientation of its leaders to that of the United States.

Syrianism. A number of scholars have declared Pipes's argument far-fetched.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, a number of scholars have contended that Syrian foreign policy under Hafez al-Asad did not indicate strong ideological dimension and that it flows primarily from structural considerations (Telhami and Barnett 2002; Seal 1965; Perthes 1995).<sup>56</sup>

Steven David (1991) claims that third world countries face more internal threats than external ones for the mere fact that they are usually overthrown from within. Hence, foreign policy is geared to Omni balance the myriad internal and exaggerated external threats. David (1991) contends, however, that for countries that face external threats and deal with manageable internal threats, foreign policy could appear to be attending to security threats and to accommodating a series of trade-offs as requisites for state formation. A number of scholars have pointed to primarily domestic economic considerations driving Syrian foreign policy. Fred Lawson (1996) tries to answer the question of why Syria goes to war, determining that Syria faces periodic crises of accumulation that can only be relieved by initiating wars.

Lawson (1996) relies on the Marxist interpretation of capitalism and the crisis of accumulation, drawing on three dynamics: 1) the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, 2) the over-accumulation of capital, and 3) the increasingly

<sup>55</sup> Yahya Sadowski, "The Evolution of Political Identity in Syria," in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, eds. Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2002).

Patrick Seal, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Assad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995).



disproportionate capital accumulation across different departments of the economy (19). Lawson (1996) explores a linear inference linking domestic political economic transformations and foreign policy.<sup>57</sup> Applying a Marxist theoretical underpinning geared toward capitalist societies to explain the link between economic transformation and foreign policy in socialist states is problematic. In more recent work on Syria, Radwan Ziadeh renders the source of policy in Syria to the strong, highly influential security apparatuses, which, according to Ziadeh (2011), define the political discourse and have a monopoly on the “truth,” as he puts it.<sup>58</sup> Ziadeh fails to provide the causal linkage between the security apparatuses and the making of foreign policy in Syria, as he focuses predominantly on the strength of those security institutions. Again, the “how” seems to be missing from Ziadeh’s analysis. Other than the obvious lack of theoretical foundation of his work, very little has been added to the debate as to what has driven Syrian foreign policy and alignment maneuvers since 1970.

Criticism directed to the domestic politics model in general, and the sectarian rule argument in particular, is twofold. On one hand, some quantitative cross-national studies have found stronger links between foreign policy and national interests than between foreign policy and regime type and internal conflict.<sup>59</sup>

Sectarian rule can be an easy accusation to level if the head of the authority pyramid

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<sup>57</sup> Fed H. Lawson, *Why Syria Goes to War: Thirty Years of Confrontation*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>58</sup> Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations, and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Patrick McGowan and Howard Shapiro, *The Comparative Study of Foreign Policies : A survey of Scientific Findings* (Beverly Hills & London: Sage Publications, 1973).

belongs to a minority sect, in this case the Alawi sect<sup>60</sup>. Scholars who have studied Syria's authoritarian establishment and are experts on Syria in their own right discount the accusation of "minority sect rule" as irrelevant to Syria's social and political reality.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the ethnically and religiously diverse composition of the inner circle— the Syrian government, the Syrian people's council, the military, and the top military generals—has consistently defied this juxtaposition. Ethnic and religious diversity in regime composition does not lend itself to more democratic practices by the decision makers. It does, however, discount the role of "preserving minority rule" as the main driver of policy making. Generating institutional loyalty by all branches of government, especially with the large bureaucracy in Syria, where one in five Syrians is employed by the government (Hinnebusch 2001),<sup>62</sup> must logically reside in a mutual interest-generating mechanism between Syrians and their government, other than that of preserving the supposed rule of a minority.

### ***The Monadic Behavior of Authoritarian States***

Democratic peace literature has dominated the liberal literature on international relations and foreign policy. The influential findings, which rest on analyzing domestic or unit level factors, are of a dyadic nature in which empirical evidence has shown that democratic states do not wage war with each other.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The Alawi minority demographics: 10% of population of 23 million (2010). Sunni 70%, Christians 14%, 5% Druze, 1% Other.

<sup>61</sup> Carsten Wieland, *Syria, A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring*. (Berlin Cune, 2012).

Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria, from Authoritarian Upgrading to Revolution," *International Relations* 88, no. 1 (2012): 95–113.

<sup>62</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London Routledge, 2001).

<sup>63</sup> Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles of a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Further research has attempted to explore the monadic nature of democratic states and whether they are more peaceful toward any state, either a democracy or a non-democracy.<sup>64</sup> Research has also focused on the propensity to engage in war in democracies that are undergoing regime transition.<sup>65</sup> Liberal literature has extended the unit level line of inquiry to less democratic states in which the heads of state operate under fewer societal constraints (O'Neal, Russell, and Berbaum 2003, 377). Such categorization, mostly relevant in the Polity IV data set,<sup>66</sup> takes a line of inquiry that goes from point A, accounting for the extent of societal constraints placed on the executive (ranging from unlimited authority to executive parity), to point B, regime type (ranging from full democracy, a 10 on a scale of 10 to -10, to autocracy a -6 to -10). I argue in this study that executives in one-party authoritarian states do not work under societal constraints and hence have the

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Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism and Socialism*. New York: Norton, 1997. James Ray, *Does Democracy Cause Peace*, 1998, *Annual Review of Political Science* 1:27-46.

Christopher Gelpi and Michael Griesdorf, *Winners or Losers? Democracies in International Crisis, 1918-1994*. 2001, *American Political Science Review* 95 (3):633-647.

<sup>64</sup> Rudolph J. Rummel, *Power Kills: Democracy as a Method of Non-Violence* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

Herald Muller and Jonas Wolff, *Dyadic Democratic Peace Strikes Back: Reconstructing the Social Constructivists Approach After the Monadic Renaissance*. Fifth Pan-European International Relations Conference, The Hague, 2004.

<sup>65</sup> James Lee Ray, "Does Democracy Cause Peace?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998): 27-46.

Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

John O'Neal, Bruce Russett and Michael L. Berbaum, "Causes of Peace: Democracy Interdependence and International Organization, 1885-1992," *International Studies Quarterly* 47 (2003): 371-393.

<sup>66</sup> For more information on the Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transition, 1800-2012, University of Maryland, visit <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>.

ability for autonomous, national interest seeking, rational foreign policy making under certain domestic qualifications, such as power consolidation.

What determines foreign policy making and alignment maneuvers in authoritarian states? A number of International Relations scholars tried to tackle this question by asking if authoritarian states are more prone to war than others. Jack Levy (1989) addresses the scapegoat hypothesis, also known as the divisionary war hypothesis, based on group cohesion theory, in which internal conflict might prompt belligerent foreign policies by authoritarian states to mask domestic troubles. Levy (1989) contends that empirical evidence has shown that there are no consistent or meaningful relationships between internal conflicts and external behaviors of states (282).<sup>67</sup> Chiozza and Goemans (2003) further bolster this assertion, contradicting the divisionary war hypothesis by contending that leaders who are at risk of losing office are less inclined to initiate wars.<sup>68</sup> Lai and Slater (2006) make a distinction between military authoritarian states and single-party authoritarian states, contending that the latter have institutions effective at managing internal dissent.<sup>69</sup> Since the questions of war and the initiation of war have been the predominant dependent variables in the literature addressing foreign policies of authoritarian states, I argue that expanding the dependent variable beyond the single-minded question of war, what motivates an alliance in this case,

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<sup>67</sup> Jack Levy, "The Divisionary Theory of War: A Critique," in *The Handbook of War Studies*, ed. M. I. Midlarsky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989).

<sup>68</sup> Giacomo Chiozza and H. E. Goemans, "Peace Through Insecurity: Tenure and International Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 47, no. 4 (2003): 443–467.

<sup>69</sup> Brian Lai and Dan Slater, "Institutions of the Offensive: Domestic Sources of Dispute Initiation in Authoritarian Regimes 1950-1992," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no.4 (2006): 133–139.

would serve as a comprehensive dependent variable capturing the effect of various internal and external independent factors.

There have been very few attempts to address the issue of regime survival using quantitative approach. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita (2003) proposes in his selectorate theory that leaders maintain power by satisfying their winning coalitions. In autocracies, leaders tend to satisfy their small winning coalitions using private goods that cannot be shared. Political survival occurs mostly when the selectorate is large and the winning coalition is small, as is the case in autocracies. The selectorate are the people who meet institutional requirements to choose the leadership. Despite the popularity of this theory, it has little to offer with regard to understanding the dynamic behind foreign policy decisions in authoritarian states, other than that authoritarian regimes are more likely to survive. De Mesquita contends that measuring winning coalitions and selectorate in non-democratic states are still *in infancy* (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, 133).<sup>70</sup>

Works that try to capture the motivation behind alignment choices in the Middle East are very limited. One notable work by Jack Levy and Michael Barnett (1991) analyzed Egypt's alignment choices between 1963 and 1973. I agree with Levy and Barnett (1991) that external and internal variables need to be included in an integrated theoretical framework to account for alignment maneuverers of individual states (378). I differ, however, on the stated motives of authoritarian states in their alignment choices. Levy and Barnett (1991) contend that alliance formation in third world countries is a substitute for internal resource mobilization.

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<sup>70</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The Logic of Political Survival*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003). p.33

In this context, alignment choices of third world countries are not guided necessarily by external threats and opportunities. Rather they are often a substitute for a lack of resources to support a military establishment, a substitute for increased military spending so not to jeopardize the consumption-based strategy of pacifying dissidents, and a substitute for the economic and political infrastructure inadequacies. Basically, forming an alliance for such a state serves the purpose of funding domestic stability, costly economic objectives, and regime survival. This approach is very similar to the domestic model approach in which domestic variables dominate the discussion on what motivated an alliance decision by a third world country. While domestic variables cannot be discounted, they cannot give us a reasonable understanding of why an authoritarian, one-party state with considerable military capabilities and a consolidated power base chooses its alliances. Levy and Barnett's (1991) approach does not leave an opening to account for whether such a state expresses its national interests and aspirations to influence its regional environment to create a foreign policy role through its alignment choices. Syria's alignment with Iran, which began in 1979, did not substitute a lack of resources to support military spending or placate consumption pressures from its winning coalition. One year before the Islamic revolution in 1978, Iran experienced an unprecedented capital flight averaging \$35 billion (1980 US).<sup>71</sup> A year after the success of the Islamic revolution, Iran was hit by the eight-year-long Iraq-Iran War, which devastated its public sector-dominated economy. Oil production declined from \$20 billion in 1982 to \$5 billion in 1988; the financial loss for Iran was

<sup>71</sup> Shirin Hakimzadeh, *A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home* (MPI Migration Information Source, 2006).

estimated to be in the realm of \$500 billion.<sup>72</sup> Iran was neither economically nor politically capable of providing Syria with economic, political, or security capital. Thus, what motivated Syria's alignment with Iran? A number of external regional developments, as well as internal security turbulences, must have compelled the Syrian decision makers to find the alignment with Iran as the best strategic move at the time.

Weak states,<sup>73</sup> as discussed extensively in *Weak States in the International System*, by Michael Held (1990), are not helpless, but can derive relative power from international maneuvering: "Much of the strength of the weak states is derivative rather than intrinsic. The diplomatic art of the weak state is to obtain, commit, and manipulate as far as possible, the power of other, more powerful states in their own interests" (257).<sup>74</sup> A number of scholars have pointed to Syria's ability to maneuver and exert regional influence. They also argue that Syria and Iran might be eligible for regional middle power status (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 1997).<sup>75</sup> Bahgat Korany (1988) contends that foreign policies of states such as Syria have tried to strike a balance between *la raison de la nation* and *la raison d'état*. Syria, Korany

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<sup>72</sup> Arash Duera, *The Iranian Rentier State*. (Berlin: VDM Verlage, 2009).

<sup>73</sup> Weak states have the specific characteristics, as they are considered in Held. An underdeveloped weak state has a population from 20 to 30 million. Syria's population is 23 million (2002), and a \$23 billion GNP (2002).

<sup>74</sup> Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System*. (Frank Cass and Co., 1990).

<sup>75</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anush Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 1997).

says, tries to define a *role-conception*, giving it a distinctive place or mission within the larger Arab community.<sup>76</sup>

In contrast to the variations of the domestic, ideological, and minority rule model, neoclassical realism theory takes into account the external environment, in addition to domestic politics, internal extraction capacity, state power and intention, and leaders' perception, to explain foreign policy. Neoclassical realism has been described as bridging the gap between liberalism and neorealism and foreign policy analysis (Rathbun 2008; Folker 1997; Schweller 2003; Taliaferro 2006).<sup>77</sup>

Gideon Rose (1998) describes this established school of international relations thus<sup>78</sup>:

It explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables... The scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why it is realist. The impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressure must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why it is neoclassical. (146)

The neoclassical realism approach would include a first, second, and third level variables. The initial first-level starting point of neoclassical realism is the

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<sup>76</sup> Bahgat Korany, *The Dialectics of Inter-Arab Relations, 1967-1987*. In *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Two Decades of Change*. ed. Yuhudu Lukas and Abdullah Battah. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 164–178.

<sup>77</sup> Brian Rathbun, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism," *Security Studies* 17 (2008): 294–321.  
Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Realist Environment, Liberal Process, and Domestic Level Variables," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 1–25.  
Randall Schweller, *The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism, 2003, International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State," *Security Studies* 15 (2006): 464–495.

<sup>78</sup> Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51 (1998): 144–172.



independent structural variable of the anarchic international system. The structural environment of self-help determines states' interests and subsequent behavior. In offensive neoclassical realism, states not only seek security, they also seek to control, shape, and influence their external environment (Rose 1998, 147). The second-level intervening variable is domestic state power.<sup>79</sup> Neoclassical realism contends that internal state characteristics determine how a state can extract internal resources to react to the anarchic nature of the external environment. Such internal variables have been defined as the level of institutional formation, regime legitimizing ideology, level of elite consensus, and level of social unity. The third-level intervening variable is the decision makers who dictate foreign policy. Rose (1998) contends that it is up to individual leaders to determine and interpret the systemic environment. Hence, when leaders misunderstand the international system or make foreign policy decisions based on non-structural factors, "the system will discipline the state in the form of foreign policy failure" (Rathbun 2008, 311).<sup>80</sup>

### **Neoclassical Realism and Middle East Alignment Choices**

This study offers a revised version of the neoclassical realism model to explain the causes of Syria's alignments between 1970 and 2010. This revised application has the potential to expand to include other states in the MENA region. The dependent variable is the foreign policy decision of alignment. The first independent variable is the external environment, the Middle East regional system.

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<sup>79</sup> This project takes the definition articulated by Fareed Zakaria in which he defines state power as: "*The portion of national power the government can extract for its purposes, and reflects the ease with which central decision-makers can achieve their ends*" in *From Wealth to Power*, ed. Fareed Zakaria (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 9.

<sup>80</sup> Brian Rathbun, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism," *Security Studies* 17 (2008): 294–321.

For an alignment decision to be made, the regional system exhibits an environment where the leader may perceive an opportunity to increase his security or increase his regional influence by forming an alliance. Hence, the international system conditions the alignment but does not control it. The second-level intervening variable accounts for state power defined by state characteristics, such as economic and security needs. Security needs are interpreted as regime security in the form of consolidation; economic needs are a reflection of annual GDP and economic development indicators. The third-level intervening variable is the leaders' perception, evaluation, and interpretation of first- and second-level variables. This research evaluates the third-level variable by utilizing an actor-specific approach, Poliheuristic theory of decision-making, to evaluate the decision-making process of the main decision maker in each alignment incident. This, in all, will be the theoretical underpinning by which to test the three contending hypothesis proposed by this project:

***Null hypothesis:*** Syrian alignment choices are the result of Syrian decision makers' reactions to the external security environment after taking into account domestic economic and security considerations.

***Alternative hypothesis 1:*** Syrian alignment choices are ideological, adhering to Ba'ath party ideology and Alawi sect interests for the purpose of regime survival.

***Alternative hypothesis 2:*** Syrian alignment choices are congruent with bandwagoning, a realist prediction for weak states.

Decision-making theories in international relations have ranged from rational analytic theories<sup>81</sup> to cognitive theories, considering that cybernetic theory<sup>82</sup> operates under a more restricted yet similar set of assumptions as does cognitive theory (Cutler 1981, 58).<sup>83</sup> For example, in the analytic paradigm of decision-making, the decision maker's motivation is to achieve the optimum outcome, or at least an acceptable one, while the main motivation for the decision maker from the cognitive and the cybernetic paradigm is survival. The *modus operandi* for the decision maker in the analytic paradigm is the assumption of alternative outcomes sensitive to pertinent information, in contrast to the cognitive, which focuses on few of the incoming variables. While rational expected utility theories focus on outcome validity, cognitive psychology focuses on process validity (Mintz 2003).<sup>84</sup> The main focus of rationalists is the internal logical coherence of the theory and its high predictive power, while cognitive psychologists tend to focus on the importance of descriptive accuracy (Danilovic 2003, 127).<sup>85</sup> Scholars have

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<sup>81</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lelman, *Reason and War* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>82</sup> John Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

Patrick James and John Oneal, "The Influence of Domestic and International Politics on the President's Use of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35 (1991): 307–332.

Charles Ostrom and Brian Job, "The President and the Political Use of Force," *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986): 541–566.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Cutler, "Decision Making and International Relations: Cybernetic Theory Reconsidered," *Michigan Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 2 (1981): 57–63.

<sup>84</sup> Alex Mintz, *Integrating Cognitive and Rational Theories of Foreign Policy Decision Making*. (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

<sup>85</sup> Vesna Danilovic, "The Rational–Cognitive Debate and Poliheuristic Theory," in *Integrating Cognitive and Rational Theories of Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, ed. Alex Mintz (London: Palgrave, 2003).

contended that the strength of one approach is the weakness of the other (Walker 1998; Vertzberger 1990; Mintz 2003).<sup>86</sup>

Another dimension to be considered when assessing decision-making literature in foreign policy is that most research has focused on decision-making within the context of international crises and the onset of wars (Holsti and George 1975; Brecher 1980; Smith 1984; Maoz and Astorino 1992; Haney 1994).<sup>87</sup> Very few approaches in decision-making literature focus on decisions in the absence of a war-like context (Mintz 2002, 29). I propose that understanding foreign policy decision making and the motivations behind alignment choices is a valuable contribution to research done on Middle East foreign policy because interstate war is less likely and intra-state crisis, fueled by tensions between regional alignments, is the contemporary norm.

Poliheuristic theory (Mintz 2003) combines the strength of both the cognitive and rational approaches in one by bridging the analytical and cognitive

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen Walker, "Models of Foreign Policy Decisions: Rivals or Partners?" *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 2. (1998): 343–345.

Yaakov Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds*. (NY: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Alex Mintz, *Integrating Cognitive and Rational Theories of Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (London: Palgrave, 2003).

<sup>87</sup> O. Holsti and Alexander George, "The Effects of Stress on the Performance of Foreign Policy Makers," in *The Political Science Annual: An International Review*, ed. C. P. Cotter. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril, 1975), 255–319.

Michael Brecher, *Decisions in Crisis: Israel 1967 and 1973 I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

Steve Smith, "Group Think and the Hostage Rescue Mission," *British Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 1 (1984): 117–126.

Zeev Maoz and Allison Astorino, "Waging War, Waging Peace: Arab–Israeli Relations, 1970–1988," *International Studies Quarterly* 36 (1992): 373–399.

Patrick Haney, "The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Crisis: Theory and Evidence of Presidential Management of Foreign Policy Decision Making," *Political Research Quarterly* 47 (1994): 939–959.

decision-making gap. Poliheuristic theory answers *why* decision makers reached a certain decision and *how* by highlighting the process. There is a two-stage decision-making process in this theory. At the first stage, alternatives are rejected based on unacceptable dimensions to the decision maker, usually a political dimension (e.g., analogy to submission to western will). In this first stage, the decision maker uses heuristics, or cognitive shortcuts, to sort out acceptable alternatives in an environment of incomplete information, risks, time constraints, and task complexities (Mintz and Geva 1997; Mintz et al. 1997).<sup>88</sup> The theory uses the non-compensatory principle that states that politicians will rarely choose alternatives that will undermine them politically. Therefore, if a certain alternative is not acceptable on the political dimension, scoring high on another criterion such as economic consideration will not compensate, and the alternative is eliminated. The idea behind the non-compensatory model is to eliminate alternatives quickly and simplify the information search and evaluation phase. In the second stage, the decision maker employs rational thinking to maximize benefits and minimize risks by choosing the best alternative from the remaining politically acceptable alignment choices.

Brandon Kinne (2005) adapts Poliheuristic theory to explain decision making in authoritarian states. Kinne utilizes Geddes's (1999)<sup>89</sup> three-part typology of military, single party, and personalistic regimes to reach the conclusions: 1)

<sup>88</sup> Alex Mintz and Nehema Geva, "The Poliheuristic Theory of Foreign Policy Decision Making," in *Decision-Making and War and Peace*, ed. Nehema Geva and Alex Mintz (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1997).

<sup>89</sup> Barbara Geddes, *Authoritarian Breakdown: Empirical Test of a Game Theoretic Argument*. Ninety-Fifth Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, GA: 2-5 September, 1999.

military leaders will refuse options that would not satisfy the interests of the military establishment; 2) single-party states will not choose policies that would jeopardize their party's grip on power; and 3) the main decision maker in personalistic regimes will discount options that will endanger his political status (Kinne 2005, 121).<sup>90</sup> I regard Kinne's work as an *avant-garde* attempt to understand decision-making in authoritarian states. I further explore the flexibility of the Poliheuristic theory and apply it to understanding alignment decisions in authoritarian single-party states. I contend that decision-making theories give us a structured approach to understanding the motivations, hesitations, preferences, and perspectives of the decision maker.

In authoritarian single-party states such as Syria, the main decision maker and his inner circle enjoy a long tenure. This is a distinct feature that will be utilized in this project to highlight the extent to which the personal preferences and motivations of the decision maker become institutionalized in the foreign ministry, *al-mukhabarat* (security apparatus), military establishment, and also became part of the daily political vocabulary Syria's intelligentsia. The advantage of utilizing decision-making theories is the opportunity to discover consistency and change in foreign policy-making in authoritarian states, especially when decision-making *changes hands* from within the established order. This is particularly relevant since Syria saw an attempt at a bureaucratic and institutional overhaul in 2000, when

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<sup>90</sup> Brandon Kinne, "Decision Making in Autocratic Regimes: A Poliheuristic Perspective," *International Studies Perspective* 6 (2005): 114–128.

President Bashar al-Assad took office after the thirty-year rule of Hafez al-Assad (George 2003).<sup>91</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

I have demonstrated that the literature on foreign policy making and alignment choices of authoritarian states is limited and divided between the neorealist and liberalist approaches. Neorealists have expanded power politics and the structural approach to explain behavior of Middle Eastern states. Most neorealist would foresee bandwagoning for weak states, a prediction that does not hold in the Syrian cases that are the focus of this project. Liberalists have explained foreign policy of non-democratic states as irrational, catering to domestic stability and regime survival. A number of scholars have declared ideology of revisionist states to be the main explanatory variable, a proposition that suffers not only from semantic and conceptual problems as an explanatory variable, but also from methodological and philosophical ramifications. Liberalists' explanations clearly lack the capability to consider or explain the foreign policy and alignment choices of an authoritarian state with a consolidated power base, the ability of autonomous and hence rational foreign policy making. Rational foreign policy is described in a sense that the decision maker is capable of pursuing a geopolitically shaped national interest expressed in limited (not ideological or revolutionary) goals (Allison 1971; Morgenthau 1978).<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Alan George, *Syria, Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2003).

<sup>92</sup> Graham Allison, *Essence of Decisions: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston MA: Little, Brown, 1971).

Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978).

I argue that authoritarianism in the Middle East is an aggregate variable with clear systemic implications in that region, a feature that needs to be addressed as a regional norm. Only from this standpoint, I argue, can the real drivers of foreign policy making in individual Middle East countries be accounted for adequately. I have also argued that executives in one-party authoritarian states do not work under societal constraints, and therefore have the ability for autonomous, national interest-seeking, rational foreign policy making under certain domestic qualifications, such as power consolidation. National interest in this sense lies at the crossroad between domestic and external consideration. I proposed that understanding foreign policy decision-making and the motivations behind alignment choices is a valuable contribution to research conducted on Middle East foreign policy, since interstate war is less likely and intrastate crises such as domestic unrest, civil wars and instability that are fueled by tensions between regional alignments, is the contemporary norm.

This research primarily seeks to explain how alignment behavior in Syrian foreign policy, between 1970 and 2010, by testing three hypotheses and examining the relevance of the theoretical framework established by the proposed revised neoclassical realist theory and Polyheuristic theory. This study offers a revised version of the neoclassical realism model to explain the causes of alignment shifts by Syria between 1970 and 2010. This revised application has the potential to be expanded to include other states in the MENA region. The dependent variable is the foreign policy decision of alignment. The primary independent variable is the external environment, the Middle East regional system.



For an alignment decision to be made, the regional system needs to exhibit an environment in which the leader perceives an opportunity to increase his security or regional influence by forming an alliance. Hence, the international system conditions the alignment but does not control it. The second-level intervening variable accounts for state power and internal consolidation defined by state characteristics, such as economic and security needs, which in turn are the political constraints facing the decision-maker. Security needs are interpreted as regime security, and economic needs are a reflection of annual GDP and economic development indicators. The third-level intervening variable is the leader's perception, evaluation, and interpretation of first' and second-level variables. This research will evaluate the third-level variable by utilizing an actor-specific approach, Poliheuristic theory, a decision-making theory, to evaluate the decision-making process of the main decision makers in each alignment decision.

## Chapter Three

### Research Design and Method of Analysis

#### Introduction

To answer the question posed by this research regarding the factors that determined alignment choices in Syrian foreign policy between 1970 and 2010, I will test the usefulness of the null and alternative hypotheses:

- *Null hypothesis*: Syrian alignment choices are the result of Syrian decision-makers' reactions to the external security environment, after taking into account domestic, economic and security considerations. See Figure 1.
- *Alternative hypothesis 1*: Syrian alignment choices are ideological, adhering to Ba'th party ideology and Alawi sect interests for the sole purpose of regime survival. See Figure 2.
- *Alternative hypothesis 2*: Syrian alignment choices are congruent with the realist prediction of bandwagoning for weak states. See Figure 3.

I employ the historical case study method to test the null and alternative hypotheses. Across the selected cases, I conduct a structured, focused, comparative approach in which I ask standard questions about the role of independent variables for each case.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development and Social Studies* (Belfer Center Studies in International Security, MIT Press 2005).

The five case studies are:

- The Syrian–Egyptian Alliance leading up to the 1973 war
- The Syrian–Iranian Alliance 1979–2010
- Syria joining the First Gulf War Coalition in 1990
- The Syrian Alliance with Hezbollah 1990–2010
- The Syrian Regime security crisis of 2003

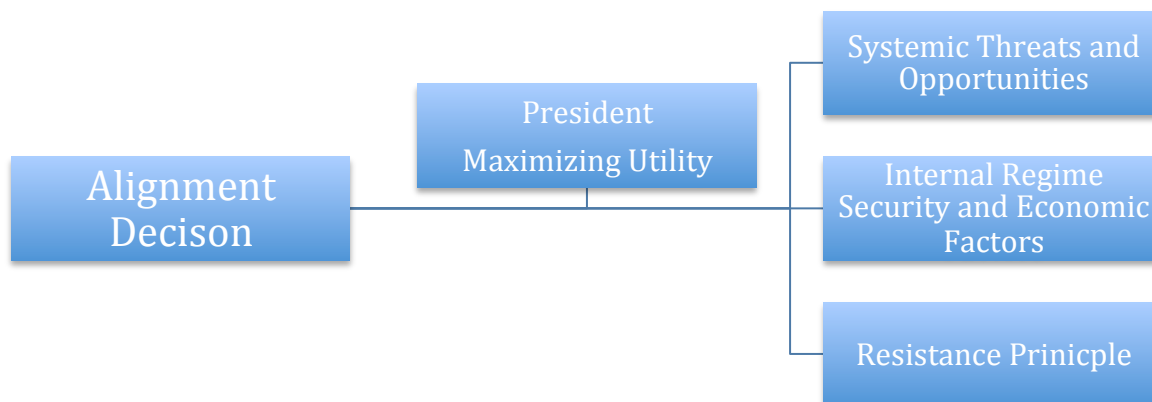
Within each case study, I undertake historical analyses in which process tracing, in particular theory-testing process tracing<sup>94</sup> illuminates the causal mechanism that connects the independent variables and the dependent variable. In addition, qualitative analysis of close to 5,000 primary documents from the National Security Archives of Syria, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Hezbollah, Hamas, and twenty standardized interviews, will triangulate the tracing of the causal mechanism within each case. Triangulation is a useful tool to increase the validation of data through cross verification from two or more sources.

Triangulation also serves to overcome the biases inherited in the problem of using one method and one theory.

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<sup>94</sup> Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pederson, “What is Process Tracing Actually Tracing? The Three Variants of Process Tracing Methods and Their Uses and Limitations.” Presentation at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Seattle, WA, September 1–4, 2011.

**Figure 1. Null Hypothesis for Alignment Determinants in Syria**



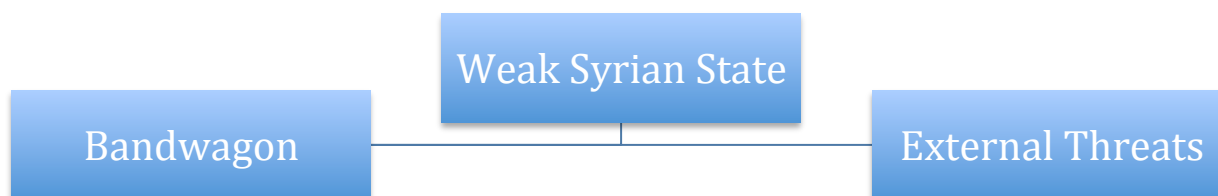
The Null Hypothesis states that the decision-maker, the president, considers systemic threats and opportunities, internal regime security and economic factors, and filters the possible alignment options through the resistance to Western intervention principle. At the second level of decision-making, the president then chooses the best alignment option, the one that would serve Syrian national interests, from the remaining politically acceptable ones.

**Figure 2. Alternative Hypothesis 1 for Alignment Determinants in Syria**



The first alternative hypothesis states that authoritarian states do not have a rational foreign policy, one that is capable of maximizing utility and minimizing costs, due subordinating foreign policy for regime survival. To compensate for lack of legitimacy domestically, authoritarian rulers utilize foreign policy as a focal point to divert the public's attention from internal economic, social and political crisis. Hence foreign policy does not serve national interests, and is then by definition irrational. This hypothesis focuses on ideology as the motivator for foreign policy in authoritarian states.

**Figure 3. Alternative Hypothesis 2 for Alignment Determinants in Syria**



This alternative hypothesis states that weak states in the international system, due to the system's anarchic nature, strive to increase their security to survive. Weak states are not capable of balancing the greatest threat or greatest power in the system. Weak states resort instead to bandwagoning with the strongest power to maximize their security.

## **1 Methodology**

### **1.1 Case Study Method**

“A product of a good case study is insight”.

- John Gerring, *Case Study Research, Principles and Practices*.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>95</sup> John Gerring, *Case Study Research, Principles and Practices* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 7.

The case study method is the most suitable method for this project because it allows for a documentation of the sequence of events, which establishes the direction of causal influence.<sup>96</sup> Small-N case studies establish causal mechanism by looking closely at the intervening steps linking the independent variables to the dependent variable. Small-N studies also have the advantage of accounting for spuriousness because they thoroughly investigate the nonlinear linkages between the dependent and independent variables. However, small-N studies lack external validity and are disadvantaged by the perceived selection bias. Methodologists rooted in the large-N studies advocate drawing causal inference from covariation of variables across cases, and they also advocate the same approach for small-N studies; this is, however, misleading advice.<sup>97</sup> Selecting positive cases based on the dependent variable in small-N studies does not bias the selection process.<sup>98</sup>

### ***1.2 Structured Focused Comparative Approach and Process Tracing***

This project employs a structured, focused, comparative approach across the five cases. A structured, focused comparison, as coined by Alexander George,<sup>99</sup> standardizes the approach by asking standard questions that reflect the research

<sup>96</sup> Michael Coppedge, "Theory Building and Hypothesis Testing, Large N vs. Small N Research on Democratization." Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 25–27, 2002.

<sup>97</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Place of publication: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.130.

<sup>98</sup> David Collier, James Mahoney, and Jason Seawright, "Claiming too Much, Warning About Selection Bias" in *Rethinking Social Inquiry, Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, eds. H.E. Brady and D. Collier (Place of publication: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Complex Causal Relations and Case Study Methods: The Example of Path Dependence," *Political Analysis* 14, no. 3 (2006): 250–267.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander L. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison" in *Diplomacy, New Approaches in History, Theory and Policy*, ed. Paul Gordon Lauren (New York: Free Press, 1979).

objective, thereby making accumulations of the findings in each case and allowing for a systemic comparison across the cases.

The standardized questions are as follows:

- External Systemic Environment: How did Syria's security needs and external threat perception of Israel, the United States, and Arab states affect the alliance choice in each case?
- Internal Consolidation: How did consolidation between the business community, military, and maintaining support of the bureaucracy require a shift in alignment in each case? How did the preference of the merchants and economic development needs dictate the choice of alignment in each case?
- How did a possible analogy to submission to America's interests in the region narrow the options of alignment for the Syrian decision maker in each case?
- How did the decision maker assess available alliance choices at that precise historical moment?

Within each case, I utilize theory-testing process tracing to unravel the cause and effect link predicted among the alignment decision and the external, internal, and actor-specific factors into smaller pieces, linking observable evidence to each piece.<sup>100</sup> Linking those pieces together produces the causal mechanism, "a complex system, which produces an outcome by the interaction of a number of parts".<sup>101</sup> The causal mechanism, I assume, is tied to a time/space contingency. A further

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<sup>100</sup> Stephen van Evera, *Guides to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Place of publication: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>101</sup> Stuart Glennan, "Mechanisms and the Nature of Causation," *Erkenntnis* 44, no. 1(1996): 49-71.



assumption is that process tracing is an analytical approach based on “configurational thinking”,<sup>102</sup> where a plurality of factors work together to produce a certain outcome. The first step is to conceptualize the variables at the theoretical level. Then I will operationalize the linkages or entities connecting Y (dependent) with X<sub>1</sub>, X<sub>2</sub>, and X<sub>3</sub> (independent variables) by matching each entity with observable manifestations. In this way, the theoretical level is linked to the empirical case-specific observations,<sup>103</sup> with the understanding that the process tracing approach is a Y-centered research. Whether the causal chain is based on necessary or sufficient causal conditions (Goertz and Levy 2007)<sup>104</sup> is further illuminated by pointing to the necessary and contextual conditions that lead to the alignment decisions in each case.

It is important to clarify that the process-tracing method does not strive for statistical generalization. Rather the goal is to specify the set of causal configurations based on a combination of necessary conditions that make an alignment choice possible. Hence the goal is “possibilistic generalization” (Blatter and Haverland 2012).<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Charles C. Ragin, *Redesigning Social Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>103</sup> Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pederson, “What is Process Tracing Actually Tracing? The Three Variants of Process Tracing Methods and Their Uses and Limitations.” Presentation at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Seattle, WA, September 1–4, 2011, p.10.

<sup>104</sup> Gary Goertz and Jack Levy, *Explaining War and Peace, Case Studies and Necessary Conditions Counterfactuals* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>105</sup> Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland, *Designing Case Studies, Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research* (Place of publication: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), page ###.

### 1.3 Selection of Case Studies

For qualitative research in small-N studies, case selection often must be done intentionally.<sup>106</sup> Crucial cases, the cases that are likely to represent the outcome of interest (i.e., alignment) are highly representative, and they are therefore chosen for hypothesis testing. The *crucialness* of the case is assessed qualitatively based on the independent variables. I single out one independent variable that is theoretically relevant to both the null and the alternative hypotheses: regime security. I select the cases in which regime security was highly challenged between 1970 and 2010. I then evaluate this variable by developing a scale ranging from 1 (*not challenged*) to 10 (*regime collapse*). Events that received a score of 7 and above on the identified variable are selected as part of the case studies for this project. The data pool is the approximately 5,000 National Security archives for Syria, Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Hezbollah and Hamas, supplemented by news headlines from the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *al Sharq al Awsat*, and *al Hayat Arabic* newspapers. The qualitative selection method resulted in four crucial, representative cases. I added a fifth case: a well-known regime security crisis of 2003 after the invasion of Iraq, taking General Colin Powel's ultimatum discussion with President Bashar al-Asad in Damascus on May 3rd, 2003,<sup>107</sup> to represent a 9 on the aforementioned regime security scale.

<sup>106</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Place of publication: Princeton University Press, 1994), page ###.

<sup>107</sup> This speech was widely referred to in the Arab media at the time, but was most extensively explained by the following article in *Foreign Affairs*: Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, *The Road to Damascus*. *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004 Issue.

## 2 Five Selected Cases

- The Syrian–Egyptian Alliance leading up to the 1973 war
- The Syrian–Iranian Alliance 1979–2010
- Syria joining the First Gulf War Coalition in 1990
- The Syrian Alliance with Hezbollah 1990–2010
- The Syrian Regime security crisis of 2003

## 3 Data Collection

The data is derived primarily from written historical accounts of the events involved in the selected cases. Books, articles, and newspapers in English and Arabic provide the bases of the data set. In addition, close to 5,000 files from the National Security Archive on Syria, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Hezbollah, Hamas, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq are included in the data set as well.

In addition, I conducted extensive field research in Syria between January 2010 and January 2011. As a result, I have compiled twenty semi-standardized interviews with Syrian officials and scholars in addition to an interview with an Israeli official in New York, a general discussion at the Israeli embassy in Washington DC (June 2009), interviews with two European academics in Syria, and interviews with two ex-Syrian diplomats in 2013. The time spent doing field research in Syria gave me access to the Syrian Foreign Ministry, the Syrian Regional Command Center in Damascus, the Ministry of Economics, the Ministry of Foreign Trade, the Office of National Statistics, Ba’th Party affiliates in Dar’a, the Strategic Studies Center at Damascus University, and the Political Science Department at Damascus University. In addition to the standardized interviews conducted, I had

the opportunity to informally discuss the politics of Syria, especially its foreign policy, with a wide range of Syrians, ranging from casual discussions with college professors to discussions with students, intellectuals, authors, and regular professionals. This informal part of my stay in Syria provided a valuable backdrop to the formal research and hypothesis testing that is offered in the following chapters.

## Chapter Four

### Syria–Egypt Alignment 1971

*Henry Kissinger to Hafez al-Asad, "Look, you have no choice. You have to do the same thing.\* The only choice is whether you do it gracefully or gracelessly." To which al-Asad replied, "You're wrong. You've betrayed Vietnam. Someday you're going to sell out Taiwan. And we're going to be around when you get tired of Israel." Kissinger laughs, "That is not going to happen." (1975)*

\*Kissinger referencing Egypt and Israel's disengagement agreement in 1975.<sup>108</sup>

This chapter will investigate the factors that led Syria to forge an alliance with Egypt in 1971. The introduction will illuminate the relevant regional and domestic political landscape up until the launch of the Corrective Movement in Syria by Hafez al-Asad in 1970. The chapter then examines the suitability of neoclassical realism theory and Polyheuristic theory in explaining Syrian foreign policy and alignment with Egypt. Tracing the process through the external environment, domestic factors, and the politically acceptable alignment alternatives available to the Syrian decision makers will provide a structured and comprehensive causal sequence leading to the decision to align with Egypt at a specific point in time. To further bolster the findings, this chapter discusses counterfactuals in which a hypothetical set of external and domestic factors are investigated. The first explanation is then contrasted with alternative hypotheses, which, if considered as a motivator for

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<sup>108</sup> Newsweek interview with Henry Kissinger, June 18, 2000.  
<http://www.newsweek.com/table-assad-160769>

alignment, would have produced different outcomes (i.e., different alignment choices). The first alternative hypothesis points out that authoritarian states are irrational and therefore do not maximize utility and minimize cost in their policy decisions because policy is beholden to regime survival or domestic stability. The second alternative explanation examines the plausibility of bandwagoning as the predicted behavior of a weak state in the anarchic international system.

#### 4.1 Introduction

Hafez al-Asad's Corrective Movement of 1970 was in essence a bloodless coup against the original founders of the Ba'th party and the Ba'thist revolutionaries of 1963. Salah Jadeed, Michel Aflaq, Ibrahim Makhus, and other members of the civilian branch of the Ba'ath shouldered the blame for the loss of the Golan Heights and part of Mount Hermon in 1967's Six-Day War, and Syria's disastrous intervention in the Jordanian civil war of September 1970. In the Black September crisis, Salah Jadeed sent Syrian troops equivalent to a battalion to fight on the Palestinian guerrillas' side. The Syrian forces were able to break through the 40th Armored Jordanian Brigade and reach the al-Ramtha crossroads. Al-Asad, commander of the Syrian air force at the time, refused to provide air cover for the Syrian troops,<sup>109</sup> which led the Syrian battalion to retreat after heavy airstrikes from

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<sup>109</sup> The NSA declassified memorandum of a phone conversation between Henry Kissinger and Frank Shakespeare of the 6th Fleet United States Navy Force indicates that on September 17, 1970, the United States and Israel were ready to intervene if Syria or Iraq intervened in Jordan.

([http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKA03761](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKA03761)).

the Jordanian air force on September 23–24.<sup>110</sup> Jadeed's government was also at the center of an international crisis with the hijacking of TWA Flight 840 that resulted in its landing in Syria in August 1969. Jadeed's regime was accused of tolerating and aiding the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine's (PFLP) terrorist activities and, according to United States National Security Agency (NSA) documents, was less than cooperative with the international community in freeing the hijacked Israeli passengers.<sup>111</sup> Syria was under threat of sanctions due to its lack of cooperation, according to an unclassified White House memorandum dated October 31, 1970.<sup>112</sup> The Roger Initiative, launched in December 1969, was heavily opposed by Jadeed, who called it "the peace of the grave." Even the word *peace* meant treason in Jadeed's understanding. However, Jadeed's position was heavily opposed by the Ba'th Party's military wing headed by al-Asad.

With the chasm widening between the civilian branch of the Ba'th Party headed by Jadeed, and the military branch headed by al-Asad, an Emergency

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Among the NSA's Kissinger transcripts is an unclassified memorandum of a conversation between Henry Kissinger, Yitzhak Rabin, Shlomo Argov, and Alexander Haig on September 22, 1970, in which Israel contends that it was ready to intervene in Jordan by air and to commit ground troops if necessary. It was later clarified in the memorandum that King Hussein was only asking for Israeli air support. Kissinger strongly suggested that Jordan and Israel coordinate through the United States.

([http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnas&rft\\_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT00186](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT00186)).

<sup>110</sup> Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (NY City: Bison Books, 2002).

<sup>111</sup> NSA, Department of State Memorandum for Henry Kissinger and the White House, September 10, 1969.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnas&rft\\_dat=xri:dnas:article:CTE00044](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CTE00044)

<sup>112</sup> NSA, White House Memorandum, October 31, 1970.  
[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnas&rft\\_dat=xri:dnas:article:CTE00130](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CTE00130)

National Congress convened in Damascus on October 30, 1970, in which the military loyal to al-Asad surrounded the building while the civilian branch of the Ba'th was criticizing al-Asad inside. The National Congress disbanded on November 12, 1970, and the so called Corrective Movement was launched on November 13, 1970.<sup>113</sup>

As a result of the defeats in 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars, the Black September intervention of the Syrian military, and the hijacking crisis, the Syrian population detested Jadeed's Ba'th leadership. At this critical juncture in Syria's political history, al-Asad was able to legitimize his coup as a necessary corrective measure to the Syrian public.

The general attitude of the Arab street at that time was of a leftist and revolutionary nature. Between the 1950s and the early 1970s, revolutionaries in Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Oman, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, and Saudi Arabia worked to strip political power from the old ruling class, nationalize their economic assets and offered an egalitarian path to development domestically, while resisting the forces of imperialism externally.<sup>114</sup> By the late 1960s, Arab forces had suffered consecutive defeats in the 1948, 1956, and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars, and Arab publics longed for decisive yet realistic leadership that could achieve tangible results in any future conflicts with Israel.

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<sup>113</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad* (California: University of California Press, 1989), p. 162.

<sup>114</sup> The revolutions that swept the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s were against the established social, political, and economic feudal order. Once in power, these military officers also quelled the rising influence of communist sympathizers. The revolts in Egypt in 1952, Yemen in 1962, and Syria in 1954, 1958, and again in 1963 succeeded. In Saudi Arabia, Nasser al Said's 1950s movement did not succeed. Oman's Dhofar revolution in 1962 also did not succeed.



Hafiz al-Asad was keen to situated the Corrective Movement within the context of a progressive, socialist, pan-Arabist political movement that was popular at the time. He needed Ba'th Party loyalists, and the loyalty of the military, while establishing better relations with the disgruntled Damascene and Aleppo bourgeoisie, that had been targeted with expropriation since the creation of the United Arab Republic with Egypt in 1958.<sup>115</sup> By tending to the business interests of this class, al-Asad mended his relations with the conservative Arab states. Al-Asad reached out especially to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, by repairing a pipeline carrying Saudi crude oil through Syria to the Mediterranean; in exchange, King Faisal gave Syria 200 million dollars.<sup>116</sup>

Al-Asad consolidated his base by concluding the policies of land reform (1958–1970), expanding the public sector, and enacting the economic liberalization policy of *al-Infitah*, which opened Syria to foreign investment. Externally, al-Asad paved the way for a realistic regional policy that began to interact with Israel and the complexities of Arab regional relations with a focus on Syria. He thought to develop this new policy without disbanding the Pan-Arab movement, and the calls for liberation of Palestine. He emerged as a young military revolutionary who was going to correct the wrongs of the 1967 Arab defeat, while presenting himself

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<sup>115</sup> Jamal Abdul Nasser dissolved all political parties in Syria in 1958, essentially ending democratic practices in place since 1946, and the traditional Syrian elite influence in Syrian politics. Furthermore, he embarked on a sweeping nationalization and land reform that stripped economic power from the traditional ruling class in Syria. See Said Aburish, *Nasser: The Last Arab* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).

<sup>116</sup> Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (NY: Cornell Studies in Security Affairs, 1990).

regionally as the successor to Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser's leadership of the Pan-Arab movement.

Michel Aflaq, the founder of the Ba'ath Party in 1947, maintained that the Syrian National Command Center, along with Syrian military personnel, had rebelled against the party founders, first in 1963 and again in 1970.<sup>117</sup> Aflaq, along with Jadeed, contended that Arab leadership needed to commit itself to fighting Israel and imperialism even if it took decades. Anything less was to be considered treason in his view.<sup>118</sup> However, the emerging Syrian leadership disagreed and Aflaq sought refuge in Iraq while Jadeed was imprisoned in the Damascus, al Mazzeh prison in Damascus in 1970, until his death in 1993. While the Ba'ath Party is founded on principles that prioritize Arab unity, and positive nonalignment internationally, al-Asad adopted these principles to fortify Syrian national interests politically and economically, and to forge a "Syrian role" in the region with newly strengthened relations with the USSR.<sup>119</sup> He brought Syria back from the brink of

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<sup>117</sup> For further readings on the Ba'ath, its foundation, and guiding principles see David Roberts, *The Ba'ath and the Creation of Modern Syria* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Mohammad Haidar, *The Ba'ath and the Great Departure* (1988); John Devlin, *The Ba'ath Party, Its Origins: A History from Its Origins to 1966* (Hoover Institutions Publication Press, 1976); Itmar Rabinovich, *Syria under the Ba'ath 1963–1966: The Army Party Symbiosis* (City: Shiloah Center for Middle East and African Studies, Israel University Press, 1972).

<sup>118</sup> Michael Aflaq, *Starting Point: The Road to Unity goes through Palestine*. July 1970. In the First Chapter, Part II: The Historic Plot Against the Ba'ath. The Works of Michel Aflaq in: *For the Sake of Ba'ath*. [www.albaath.online.fr](http://www.albaath.online.fr)

<sup>119</sup> An NSA declassified secret intelligence note dated September 20, 1972, referring to the Knesset resolution of September 11, 1972, lays out the increase in Fedayeen activity from mainly Lebanese territory and from the Syria-Israel ceasefire line. The note also points out the closer ties between al Assad and the Soviet Union after Sadat expelled the Soviet mission from Egypt in 1971, a loss the Soviets tried to recoup with closer ties with Syria ([http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri.dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri.dnsa:article:CTE00171](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri.dnsa&rft_dat=xri.dnsa:article:CTE00171)).

stagnant radical policy into a flexible realm where Syrian national interests could become the objective of Syrian foreign policy.

The year 1970 ushered a historical turning point in Syria, the unfolding decade witnessed regional developments that changed the nature of war with Israel, inter-Arab relations, and saw the rise of political Islam. This chapter traces the factors that led to the decision to align with Egypt, and the subsequent 1973 October War, in the context of change in leadership in both states in 1970. Gamal Abdul Nasser suffered a heart attack and died after the Arab League summit concluded in Cairo on September 28, 1970. This summit ended the bloody confrontation between the Palestine Liberation Organization and King Hussein of Jordan (Black September), and Abdul Nasser's Vice President, Anwar Sadat, became Egypt's president. In Syria, al-Asad, an air force pilot and a Ba'th Party member who had carried out a bloodless coup against the civilian branch of the Ba'th Party in November 1970, became president the following year, after being elected by a popular referendum in March 1971.

Both presidents needed to legitimize their rule and presented their respective agendas as a continuation of Abdul Nasser's policies as far as inter-Arab cooperation was concerned. Sadat and al-Asad initiated a unity agreement between Egypt, Syria, and Libya in July 1971. After consecutive meetings in Cairo, Benghazi, and Damascus between August 18 and 20, 1971, the agreement was put forward for a referendum vote in Syria on September 1, 1971. This unity agreement did not fulfill its purpose of bringing about political and economic integration between the three Arab countries. It did, however, establish a new understanding between Egypt

and Syria. For the first time, Egypt dealt with Syria as an equal and was not able to dictate political moves to Syria through a bilateral agreement.<sup>120</sup> Likewise, for the first time Syria chose an alliance with Egypt with the tangible objective of regaining the Arab territories lost in the 1967 wars, namely the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights.

#### 4.2 The Decision to Align with Egypt in 1971

Why did Syria align with Egypt? What motivated al-Asad to forge an alliance with Anwar al Sadat? Given the history of disadvantaged political unity from the Syrian perspective, which both countries experienced between 1958 and 1961, it is particularly interesting to examine the causal factors that led Syria, after a decade, to deem Egypt a strategic partner with which Syria's interest could be furthered.

This chapter focuses on that moment in history when the alliance with Egypt became a strategic and viable policy choice for Syria. It does not delve into the circumstances that led to the subsequent outbreak of the 1973 war, or discuss the 1978 Camp David Accord between Egypt and Israel. This study concerns itself with the factors that caused this alliance to materialize at a specific moment in history.

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<sup>120</sup> During the period of unity between Egypt and Syria in 1958–1961 (United Arab Republic, UAR), Abdul Nasser dissolved all political parties in Syria and issued a new constitution that established a 600-member national assembly, with 400 from Egypt and 200 from Syria. Syrians were slowly phased out of positions of influence, with two appointed Syrian officials, Sabri Al Asali and Akram Al Hourani, operating from Cairo. Nasser later assigned the Egyptian general Abdul Hakim Amir to run Syrian affairs. See Said Aburish, *Nasser, the Last Arab* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).

#### 4.2.1 External Environment

There were a number of fundamental factors that shaped the external environment in 1970 at the time of the Corrective Movement. The Eisenhower Doctrine in January 1957,<sup>121</sup> on the heels of the tripartite invasion of Egypt in July, 1956 by Great Britain, France and Israel following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal established the necessary foundation of the newly emerging United States role in the Middle East. The Suez Crisis signaled the limitations of British and French influence in the Middle East and the urgency with which that power vacuum needed to be filled. With the United States fearing Soviet intervention in Egypt, President Eisenhower assured Middle Eastern allies economic and military assistance would be provided should they be threatened with aggression from states controlled by international communism. The Eisenhower Doctrine also aimed at circumventing Abdul Nasser's increasing influence after he nationalized the Suez Canal, Great Britain, France and Israel were forced to withdraw from Egypt, and Egypt's increased collaboration with the Soviet Union during the 1960s. Nasser and the Syrian Ba'th shared a similar foreign policy principle of "positive neutrality," in Nasser's terminology, and "positive nonalignment," in the Ba'thist doctrine. This prevailing policy in Abdul Nasser's Egypt, Syria, and Iraq post-1958 proved to be problematic for the United States, and demonstrated the limited success of the Eisenhower Doctrine.

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<sup>121</sup> *Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East*, January 5, 1957. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=11007&st=&st1=> retrieved June, 2013.

The regional factor that influenced the foreign policy of Syria at the time was the resolutions passed by the Arab League and reached at the Khartoum Conference on September 1, 1967 following the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War.<sup>122</sup> In that conference, which followed the Six-Day War, Arab states agreed to the “Three No’s”: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel. This pronouncement defined and raised the bar for any future interaction between Israel and the Arabs, paradoxically, after a defeat. Any possible resolution with Israel thereafter, from an Arab standpoint, had to be achieved on the basis of the return of occupied territory, or following an action that would be categorized as *a retrieval of Arab dignity*. The principles laid out at the Khartoum conference radicalized Jadeded’s foreign policy even further, to the point of ideological stagnation. Syria’s radical anti-western, pro-Palestinian foreign policy between 1967 and 1970 threatened Syria’s national interest and security. At the same time, the Khartoum Resolution shaped the official rhetoric of Syrian foreign policy without dictating the strategic and tactical execution of Syria’s policy post-1970.

Furthermore, the Khartoum Resolution regionalized the economic burden of those Arab states directly affected by the belligerent situation, particularly Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. For the first time, oil, as an Arab resource, was introduced as a positive weapon in future struggles against Israel. It was agreed that Arab oil states from this moment on were required to support those states

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<sup>122</sup> Khartoum resolution September 1967, [http://www.cfr.org/world/khartoum-resolution/p14841?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fpublication\\_list%3Ftype%3Dessential\\_document%26page%3D69](http://www.cfr.org/world/khartoum-resolution/p14841?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fpublication_list%3Ftype%3Dessential_document%26page%3D69) (retrieved June 2013).

directly affected economically, to enable them to stand firm in their struggle.

Military buildup was another recommendation made by the conference.

Both Jordan and Iraq were on better terms with Syria in 1971. Jordan's King Hussein appreciated al-Asad's support of the Hashimites against the Fedayeen, and Iraq initiated a friendship pact with the Soviet Union, and ended its isolation from the Arab world in 1972. After the end of the Baghdad Pact,<sup>123</sup> which had isolated Iraq from its natural Arab environment, and after the internal political turmoil had subsided, Iraq, under President Ahmad Hassan al Bakr, reestablished relations with Syria and neighboring Arab countries. To rectify its pro-western past, Iraq overcompensated during al Bakr's rule by denouncing any negotiations with Israel, and adopted the radical Ba'thist stance supported by Aflaq and Jadeed. Al Assad gravitated toward developing an alignment with Egypt's Sadat.

A UN mission undertaken by Gunnar Jarring (also known as the Jarring Mission) in November 1967 after the Six-Day War, was established for the purpose of negotiating the implementation of UN resolution 242.<sup>124</sup> Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon agreed to participate in Jarring's efforts to broker a settlement, while Syria rejected it at the beginning and conditionally accepted it in March 1972.<sup>125</sup> The parties disagreed on the interpretations of key terms in the UN resolution. Further

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<sup>123</sup> The Baghdad Pact, also known as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) 1955–1979, was formed by Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom as an intergovernmental military alliance for the purpose of mutual cooperation and protection. Iraq withdrew from the treaty in 1958 after Abdel Karim Qasem coup d'état ended monarchical rule in Iraq.

<sup>124</sup> Details of the UN 242 resolution, <http://www.sixdaywar.org/resolution.asp> (retrieved June 2013).

<sup>125</sup> Saaida Touval, *The Peace Brokers: Mediators in the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1948–1979* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

complications arose from Egypt's insistence that Israel withdraw to pre-1967 lines, a demand unacceptable to Israel because it would restore Israel's vulnerabilities. Israel further insisted on direct peace negotiations between Israel and the Arab states, a position rejected by the Arabs and the Soviet Union.<sup>126</sup>

The Rogers Plan<sup>127</sup> proposed by the United States in 1969 was a response to the apparent failure of the UN Jarring mission. Both initiatives tried to negotiate the end to belligerence and the beginning of a lasting settlement. Both Sadat and al-Asad were willing to exchange peace for the return of their lost territory. However, Israel refused a return to the pre-1967 lines. An NSA document, a Memorandum of Conversation,<sup>128</sup> revealed that a security assessment by United States diplomat Henry Kissinger, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, Israeli Ambassador Rabin, and United States General Haig, in February 1972, had determined that it was a priority to remove Soviet forces from Egypt and that the internal political situation in Syria and Jordan was weak. Kissinger contended that there was a need to isolate Egypt from the rest of the peace negotiations between Israel and other Arab states. The Suez Canal was of strategic importance to both the United States and the Soviets especially, with Israel proposing widening and deepening of the canal.

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<sup>126</sup> The Jarring Initiative and the Response, February 1971, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/mfadocuments/yearbook1/pages/28%20the%20jarring%20initiative%20and%20the%20response-%208%20febr.aspx> (retrieved June 2013).

<sup>127</sup> The content of the Rogers Plan: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/mfadocuments/yearbook1/pages/9%20statement%20by%20secretary%20of%20state%20rogers-%209%20decemb.aspx> (retrieved July 2013).

<sup>128</sup> NSA, Secret Memorandum Discussions with Moshe Dayan, February 7, 1972 [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT00423](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT00423)



It is apparent from NSA documents of the period that Kissinger's negotiation method was based on establishing secret channels away from the press and closer to facilitating *practical applicable strategies*, as he put it. One of those secret channels was established with Hafez Ismail,<sup>129</sup> the Egyptian national security adviser to Anwar al-Sadat. Kissinger and Ismail met in February 1973 to try to establish a mutual understanding between Egypt and Israel through Kissinger's mediation.

The relevant aspect of these negotiations is the fact that Ismail stated that Syria and Egypt were partners and allies, and that Syria therefore needed to be presented with settlement terms similar to Egypt's.<sup>130</sup> The sense of a developing alliance between Egypt and Syria was present in the secret negotiations. What is also apparent from another classified NSA document is that both countries were keen on achieving a settlement with Israel that guaranteed a return of territory and accommodated Israel with the presence of troops.<sup>131</sup> Later on, both states reached the conclusion that the secret and official talks had reached a deadlock by mid-1973. They also shared the resolve that good settlement terms could only be reached after a decisive, coordinated two-front war.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> NSA, Secret Talks with Hafez Ismail in NY, February, part one, 1973, [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT00681](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT00681)

<sup>130</sup> NSA Secret Talks with Hafez Ismail in NY, February, part two, 1973 ([http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT00682](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT00682)), 7

<sup>131</sup> NSA, top-secret memorandum of discussion between Egyptian foreign minister Mahmoud Riad and Kissinger at the Rockefeller residence in October 1971, [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT00361](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT00361)

<sup>132</sup> Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 121.

A crucial factor that influenced the external environment of Syria at the time was PLO activities following the group's expulsion from Jordan in July 1971.<sup>133</sup> These activities presented a transnational problem for Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. The PLO became a political entity in 1964 yet struggled to find a permanent base for its operations against Israel. The PFLP took responsibility for the Dawson's Field hijackings in September 1970. Palestinian violence was directed against the Jordanian army in the Black September crisis and later played a central part in the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1989.

There had been deep pro-Palestinian sympathies among Arabs since the start of the British mandate over Palestine in 1920, and Arab nationalism intertwined with the Palestinian dilemma at the start of Arab independence from British and French Mandates in the 1940s. Jadeed equated the Palestinian quest for liberation and the right to return with Syrian interests. Al-Asad broke with that trend and placed the interests of Syria at the forefront by evaluating his political affiliations on a *raison d'état* basis, and so did Egypt post-1970. Egypt's editorials and articles in *al-Gumhuria* and others condemned the Palestinian Liberation Organization after the Munich Fedayeen terrorist attacks in the summer of 1972.<sup>134</sup>

Sadat and al-Asad emerged as rulers at the same time in the late 1970s, with very similar domestic and regional agendas. Both relaxed the bellicose rhetoric

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<sup>133</sup> NSA, a CIA report on terrorism and the Fedayeen dated September 1972, detailed Palestinian terrorism and hijacking activities.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CTE00149](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CTE00149)

<sup>134</sup> NSA, a Cairo telegram to United States embassies around the world, [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CTE00160](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CTE00160)

against Israel that had prevailed during Abdul Nasser and Jadeed's eras. They both placed the Palestinian dilemma in a secondary position in the hierarchy of Egyptian and Syrian national interests, which included the return of Sinai and Golan. Both leaders reversed the anti-Islamist tone of Abdul Nasser and Jadeed, and a period of Islamic revival emerged in Egypt and Syria, which both leaders would repress in the late 1970s. Both leaders changed the socialist policies of their predecessors and launched the Infitah policy of economic liberalization and encouraging foreign investment in their respective economics. .

Al-Asad met with Sadat, ten days after his inauguration in March 1971, to launch this alliance. Both leaders were heavily engaged in the secret and official peace negotiations with Israel (1967–1973 for Egypt and 1971–1973 for Syria). The two leaders were in constant contact and held frequent meetings between 1971 and 1973, as both were disappointed and determined to achieve better settlement terms. While Sadat was able to keep Egypt on the desired track and reach his objective of the return of Sinai, al-Asad dealt with negotiation and regional fallouts in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran that set Syria on a different track in its relation with Israel and the US.

What if Syria had experienced a different set of external determinants? Would that have led Syria to a different alignment strategy? The alignment with Egypt served strategic objectives that were related to Syria's sovereignty, settlement terms, and sphere of influence in the Levant. If Syria had not lost territory during the 1967 war, and if it had reached a peace settlement with Israel after 1948, the

strategic alignment with Egypt would not have served any specific strategic objectives other than to increase inter-Arab cooperation.

If Iraq had rejected the radical Ba'th ideology of Aflaq in 1970, it would have been a viable alliance option for Syria, considering Iraq's upcoming oil boom and the historical social and trade relations between Syria and Iraq. It is clear that a specific external determinant caused Syrian decision makers to see in Egypt a suitable ally to pursue its foreign policy.

Aligning with Egypt signified a historical moments in which the worldview of two leaders, Sadat and al-Asad, converged on a similar objective. Although the external environment sheds considerable light on the causes prompting Syrian decision makers to align with Egypt, it is critical to account for the domestic factors that enabled an autonomous foreign policy.

#### ***4.2.2 Internal Consolidation, Economic Conditions, and Regime Security***

To support this ambitious shift in Syria's foreign policy and to prepare the home front for a grand settlement, al-Asad needed to consolidate and expand his supportive base at home. The Corrective Movement changed Syria's regional and international position, and restructured the domestic front.<sup>135</sup> Between November 1970 and January 1973, the secularism of the Ba'th Party adjusted to the Islamic sympathies of the majority during the drafting of the new Syrian constitution. The prerequisite of being Muslim was added to the qualifications required of the Syrian president. Al-Asad reinstated the Islamic oath but objected to declaring Islam the

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<sup>135</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad and the Struggle for the Middle East* (California: University of California Press, 1990), 276.

official religion in Syria, stating that this was not in the text of the 1930 or 1953 constitutions.<sup>136</sup>

Al-Asad was keen to declare Islam the religion of peace, justice, and equality in his speeches, thereby reconnecting with the Sunni majority of Syria. He focused on presenting himself as a Muslim, praying in Sunni mosques and conversing with Sunni clerics.<sup>137</sup> In this way, he attempted to overcome the mistrust between the Ba'thist elite and the public that had prevailed between 1963 and 1970, when Jadeed and his regime alienated the majority by likening devout Muslims to savages, and Islam to the dark force of backwardness.

Al-Asad abandoned the strict socialist road to development and adopted measures for liberalization guided by state-led growth policies. He prepared the Syrian economy for the Arab investments that poured into the country after 1971,<sup>138</sup> he encouraged Arab and Syrian entrepreneurship, and the private sector was encouraged to compete for its share of public spending.<sup>139</sup> Public employment was a means of political and social control for al- Asad, and Table 2 gives an idea of how much public employment has increased between 1970 and 1990. If population is used as a point of reference, Syria's bureaucracy increased by more than twice as much as its population since 1970.

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<sup>136</sup> This became a central issue during the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood crisis (1979–1982), in which a famous Hamas cleric, Marwan Hadeed, reminded al Assad that he had called upon him to declare Islam the official religion of Syria in 1972.

<sup>137</sup> Seale, *Asad and the Struggle for the Middle East*, 279.

<sup>138</sup> International oil prices surged in the 1970s and declined in the 1980s.

<sup>139</sup> Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (City: I. B. Tauris, 1995), 51. Also see Hannah Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

**Table 2. Employment in Public Administration and in Public Economic Sector\***

	1965	1970	1980	1990
Civilian Employment	70,000	136,000	475,000	685,000
Public Industrial Sec.	28,000	57,000	140,000	145,000
Public Construction	a	b	120,000	120,000
Military and Security	65,000	100,000	300,000	530,000
Total	135,000	236,000	787,000	1,215,000
Total Workforce (millions)	1.1	1.7	2.3	3.7

a: none, b: unknown. Source: Statistical Abstracts from 1970–2000 (National Statistics Center, Damascus, Abu Remaneh, retrieved July 2010).

\* This table confirms the Volker Perthes table (141) with a similar title in *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (1995), with the exception of Public Industrial numbers for 1980.

Loyalty to the president was the determining factor based on which the close circle of al-Asad's confidants was chosen. It was known that he rarely changed his loyalties, whether his inner circle was officials, clerks, or coffee makers. The people around al-Asad retained their positions for decades.<sup>140</sup> He particularly trusted his old comrades from military school. After the eleventh National Ba'th Party Conference in August 1971, he had assigned Abdallah al-Ahmar as his assistant secretary-general. Following this, Mustapha Tlas became Defense Minister in March

<sup>140</sup> Seale, *Asad and the Struggle for the Middle East*, 178. The same point was confirmed by an employee of twenty years at the Presidential Palace in Damascus, who wished to remain anonymous (interview conducted in December, 2010).

1972, and Abdul Halim Khaddam became foreign minister and then vice president.<sup>141</sup> Al-Asad chose the heads of the security apparatus and reshuffled some military posts to ensure that military coups were unlikely. His designated henchmen in achieving this objective were Mohammad al Khuly and Naji Jamil.<sup>142</sup>

The National Progressive Front was formed in March 1972 and provided the guise of political pluralism. In reality, it delegitimized established political parties, such as the Syrian Communist Party and the Arab Socialist Union, and stripped them of their popular base. The joining parties, initially four in all, agreed to function under the Ba'th umbrella. The domestic political stage was prepared for handling more autonomous foreign policy making. Trips were made to the Soviet Union in 1971, where al-Asad signed the agreement that established the Soviet naval base in Tartus, followed by visits to Sadat in Egypt. Come grant settlement or war, the home base in Syria was set.

#### ***4.2.3 Independence and United States Penetration of the Region***

United States and the Soviet Union policy towards the Middle Eastern region during the Cold War exhibited certain characteristics. The United States established bonds with the traditional states, such as the Gulf monarchies, while the Soviet Union established relations with so-called progressive Arab states that overthrew traditional rule (especially from the 1960s to the 1970s).

The emergence of the United States' role in the Middle East during the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis coincided with the decline of British and French influence in the

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<sup>141</sup> Abdallah al Ahmar, *The Generation of Big Changes: Personal Memoirs* (Damascus: Tlas Publishing, 1998); Mustapha Tlas, *My Life's Mirror* (Damascus: Tlas Publishing, 1999).

<sup>142</sup> Derek Hopwood, *Syria, 1945–1986, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 1988); Seale, *Asad and the Struggle for the Middle East*, 184.

region. This, in turn confirmed the perception of the ascendance of United States influence in the Middle East as a continuation of colonial and imperial legacies. For an emerging leader of a frontline Arab state, adopting an anti-imperialist stance not only legitimized his rule domestically but also legitimized his role regionally. Anti-Colonial theories abounded in the 1970s, including dependency theory, which had a significant impact in Latin America and across the Arab world. Al-Asad was a son of that era, yet he maintained a pragmatic approach to relations with the United States.

As al-Asad saw it, the 1967 defeat had occurred because Israel had exploited the differences between Egypt and Syria after the collapse of the United Arab Republic in 1961. Subsequently, Arabs had fought separately in a militarily uncoordinated war in 1967. Hence, Israel needed to face Egypt and Syria together during negotiations, and if all else failed, it needed to face Egypt and Syria simultaneously during war in a two-front strategy. The reliable ally for Arabs remained the Soviet Union, and the strategic regional partner had to be Egypt and Sadat. Both leaders understood the anti-imperialist prerequisite for legitimate Arab leadership,<sup>143</sup> and they both appreciated the preparations needed for achieving tangible gains in Arab–Israeli negotiation and possible confrontation.

#### ***4.2.4 Al-Asad and Sadat: Likeminded and Independent***

Egypt was the only rational choice as a regional ally for Syria in 1971. The Gulf States, although on better terms with Syria in 1971, did not yet fit the ideological and institutional makeup of a frontline state. Jordan was still reeling

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<sup>143</sup> As a young man, Anwar Sadat spent time in jail for plotting to kill pro-British collaborators. He also announced the Free Officers Revolution in 1952 that toppled the pro-British monarchy, in addition to being Nasser's trusted advisor and successor (Seale, *Asad and the Struggle for the Middle East*, 190).



from the Black September crisis and viewed Syria with suspicion. Iraq had better relations with the Arab states but had recently welcomed back the ideological branch of the Syrian Ba'th party, headed by Michel Aflaq, who had gone into exile in Iraq. Iran was under the Shah's rule and part of the pro-western Baghdad Pact.

Egypt was Syria's only choice as a US negotiation partner, as well as a possible war partner. Peace or war meant either a coordinated peace or a coordinated war for both leaders. Coordination during settlement negotiations between 1971 and 1973, and later war preparations were the primary drivers of the unprecedented frequency with which al-Asad and Sadat visited Cairo and Moscow. Sadat repeatedly called 1973 *a year of decision*. Al-Asad personally tended toward strengthening his relationship with Sadat, whom he had known since his days in Egypt in the 1960s. Al-Asad was famous for putting in twelve-hour workdays, rarely seeing his family. Arab nationalist sentiment was paramount among Syrians, and any sectarian discussions were taboo in al-Asad's presence. Al-Asad saw his alignment with Sadat as a practical example of what Arabs could achieve as far as Arab cooperation. He insisted on mentioning in the press what he had agreed on with Sadat and downplaying any differences between 1971 and 1973.<sup>144</sup>

With the Corrective Movement, Syria declared a break with its past radical foreign policy, and hence had a flexible opportunity to set the stage for its future regional position. Al-Asad had a number of alignment options when he assumed power in 1971. Domestic constraints were at a minimum due to al-Asad's swift domestic consolidation procedures, and forging a regional position was possible.

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<sup>144</sup> Seale, *Asad and the Struggle for the Middle East*, 191.

Neoclassical realism prioritizes the external environment and at the same time allows domestic factors to have a role within the causal explanation. Polyheuristic theory enhances understanding of the decision-making process and outcome at the actor-specific level. At the first level of decision-making, the decision maker evaluates different options that are available to satisfy the policy objective. The objective of al-Asad was to set Syria on a practical non-radical foreign policy course. This priority eliminated Iraq as a possible ally in 1971, since Iraq maintained its criticism of the Ba'th coup against Hafez's leadership and welcomed founders of the Ba'th Party such as Michel Aflaq. Another priority for al-Asad was to maintain the progressive anti-imperialist pan-Arab position of Syria, a requirement that eliminated Jordan, the Gulf monarchs, Turkey, and Iran as possible allies. At the time, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt were the only politically acceptable alliance options for Syria.

During the second stage of decision-making, al-Asad had to sift through the politically acceptable options: Algeria, Libya, and Egypt. Algeria and Libya had friendly leaders who converged with Syria in the objectives of pursuing progressive secular leadership and liberating Arab-occupied territory from Israel. Yet one pressing issue made Egypt as the preferred alliance choice. Both leaders, Sadat and al-Asad, were willing to introduce the option of a negotiated military settlement with Israel as an acceptable option.

Geopolitically, both Syria and Egypt needed this partnership, which would later shift the conception of the Arab-Israeli conflict from a zero-sum game, an option that was increasingly unattainable, to a probable positive-sum game, with a

possible settlement accommodating some of the concerns of both sides., i.e. Israel and the Arab front-line states. Al-Asad needed the strategic flexibility embedded in this approach to handle the increasing regional and international complexities brought on by the Cold War, the evolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Palestinian refugee dilemma, and the increasing role of the petro-dollar in the development of Arab economies.

### **4.3 Alignment with Egypt as an Irrational Choice**

Despite the numerous referendums during the first years of al-Asad’s rule to engage Syrian citizens in the decision-making process, political authority remained highly centralized. Any remainder of political pluralism vanished with the creation of the Progressive Front that posited the Ba’th Party as the leader of state and society in the 1973 constitution, and applied censorship to the press. The Syrian Central Command declared Syria’s mission to be remaining steadfast against imperialism, working toward increased Arab cooperation, reaching economic sufficiency, and improving education and health. Syrian diplomacy, the educational system, press, and official media focused on these principles without deviation. Syria’s homogenous political discourse reflected central authoritative decision-making. Obviously, Syria was not a democracy.

For the liberal international relations paradigm, nondemocratic states’ politics are based on coercion and lack popular legitimacy. These are, in turn, sufficient conditions for their foreign policy to be utilized for regime survival, which would logically entail a negation of the rational assumption of maximizing the utility

presented in the external environment and minimizing loss. The linear quality of these propositions in liberal theories makes it possible to prove or refute its validity. A nondemocratic state is bound to prioritize regime survival and to maintain internal stability. Hence, all policy, domestic and foreign, is geared toward achieving that objective. Syria's decision to align with Egypt in 1971 is a suitable case study to examine this alternative hypothesis.

According to this alternative hypothesis, liberal theories would characterize any alliance in a nondemocratic state as irrational because it would satisfy a domestic constraint, and not necessarily a foreign policy guided by national interest and seeking attainable objectives. Syria had numerous domestic constraints in 1971, which were mostly on two fronts, the economy and the disgruntled Islamic bourgeoisie. If Syria had been guided by these constraints, it would have aligned itself with the richest Arab Sunni states, namely the Gulf monarchies, which would have necessitated a strategic rapprochement with the United States, and ending relations with the Soviet Union.

Strategically, however, this would have been the most irrational option since an alignment with the Gulf States would have forced Syria to an early settlement with Israel on Israel's terms. It would have stripped the Ba'th Party and its proclaimed progressive principles of their desired state formation effect. Progressive social policy, education for all, and equal rights for women—policies that were supported by the Ba'th Party constituency—would not have survived under such an unequal alliance with a traditional Gulf Monarchy. Furthermore, it would have destabilized

the domestic front in Syria and enabled the radical Sunni Islamist elements in Syria to try to seize power on sectarian grounds.

Syria was a nondemocratic state in 1971 and thereafter, but it was able to maximize the opportunity that the external environment presented and to minimize the associated cost to achieve the objective of preserving Syrian national interests. The objectives of increasing the maneuverability of the state in the international arena and of demanding an equitable resolution to the Arab–Israeli conflict were enhanced by the Syrian alliance with Egypt.

#### **4.4 Bandwagoning**

Weak states in the anarchic international system need to survive and increase their security. The realist prediction for weak states would have contended that Syria would bandwagon with the United States, especially after the defeat in 1967, which tested the extent of Soviet support. Bandwagoning would have constituted a logical foreign policy conduct, given the internal weakness of Syria in 1971, regional instability, the likelihood of war with Israel, and the limitations of Soviet support compared to the exceptional and unmatched United States military support for Israel.

Considering the economic and security incentives associated with bandwagoning with the United States, Syria's alliance with Egypt in 1971 is a fitting case to examine this prediction of bandwagoning actually taking place. I propose that the choice to ally with Egypt introduced enough flexibility into Syria's foreign policy orientation to allow open diplomatic communications with the United States that were sufficient for discussing Syrian national interests but short of abandoning Syrian

autonomy and political independence. The alliance with Egypt brought Syria back from the radical inflexibility of foreign policy making during Salah Jadeed's rule, into a realm of strategic maneuverability. Bandwagoning with the United States in 1971 would have been the equivalent of singing a new Baghdad Pact.

Syria's foreign policy utilized the geopolitics of Syria, its proximity to Mediterranean, Israel and Lebanon, not only to fortify Syria's regional role, but also to manipulate any attempted intervention in the region by any superpower that did not take Syria's interest into consideration. Expanding the realm of foreign policy maneuvering is a strategic aim of weak states with geopolitical significance like Syria. Thus, Syrian alliance with Egypt enabled expansion of that realm, whether during military settlement negotiations before 1973 or after, and simultaneously bolstered Syria's regional role.

Structural realism does not provide an explanation for weak states foreign policies that lack resources and material capability but enjoy geopolitical significance and are capable of autonomous foreign policy making. Bandwagoning with the United States did not materialize for Syria, whose leader was able to exploit its regional significance both economically and politically, and increased both its internal power consolidation and Syria's regional influence through its alliance with Egypt in 1971.

## Chapter Five

### The Syrian-Iranian Alliance 1980-2010

*To fully understand Khomeini one needs to understand that Khomeini's disdain for the west and imperialism exceeded his disdain for the Shah. The Shah for Khomeini was a mere puppet in the hands of the western conspiracy to intervene in the internal affairs of Muslim nations.*

Ray Takeyh, *The Hidden Iran*, 2010, p.25<sup>145</sup>

This chapter explores factors that led Syria to align with Iran in 1980, after the success of the Islamic revolution and the end of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule on February 11, 1979. What prompted a secular, pan-Arab progressive Syria to forge an alliance with an Islamic republic that had denounced secularism and modernization? How did Iran become a viable alliance option for Syria after implementation of the Camp David Accord between Israel and Egypt, the security deterioration in Lebanon, and Saddam Hussein's coup in Iraq in 1979? This chapter argues for the utility of the neoclassical realism theory of foreign policy in illuminating the causal mechanism connecting external and domestic variables that led Hafez al-Asad to forge a cooperative strategic partnership with Iran. Poliheuristic theory is used to detail the decision-making process and outcome with which Hafez al-Asad evaluated politically acceptable alliance options and then extrapolated the strategic advantage of an alliance with Iran in 1980. Counterfactual discussions are then used to highlight the causal relevancy of the external and domestic factors in explaining this alliance choice. Subsequently, this

<sup>145</sup> Ray Takeyh, *The Hidden Iran*. (Times Books, 2010), p.25.

chapter discusses the validity of alternative explanations, namely the liberal theorist prediction for foreign policy behavior of non-democratic states and the structural realist prediction for weak states.

## 5.1 The Decision to Align with Iran in 1980

What prompted Syria to align with a non-Arab state, just emerging from civil unrest, after deposing a secular Shah and establishing an Islamic state?

### 5.1.1 The External Environment

In February 1974, Syria and Egypt were heavily involved in disengagement talks. Coordination between Sadat and al-Asad about disengagement talks with Israel was based on the Egyptian experience in negotiating a military disengagement with Israel a few months earlier. By February 1974, Sadat was already working with the United States on clearing the Suez Canal and preparing it to resume operations.

The NSA documents between January and March 1974 indicate clearly that a solid agreement by the US with Sadat was a priority because “The advantage of an agreement is it keeps Sadat secure and the Russians out completely,” and it also assured that Syria would not go to war again (NSA, p.13).<sup>146</sup> It was during that time that Sadat and al-Asad embarked on their divergent paths.

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<sup>146</sup> NSA, memorandum conversation between Henry Kissinger and Golda Meir and Simcha Dinitz, March 1, 1974.  
[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01043](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01043)



Al-Asad wanted a united front with Egypt to regain the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. However, when Sadat began his secret negotiations with Israel via United States mediation, Syria did not see a choice but to pressure Sadat not to go it alone. In 1975, Syria worked on rallying the Arab states against the project of bilateral peace negotiations with Israel. The “Palestinian Cause” reemerged in Syrian political discourse, and al-Asad encouraged the creation of al-Saiqa, a Palestinian group operating in Damascus, to replace the PLO, which by that time had had a hand in igniting the civil war in Lebanon.

Syria perceived that military parity with Israel was out of the question with America’s unfettered military support for Israel. Syria also understood that risking initiating war with Israel, while Egypt, Jordan, and the PLO engaged in secret peace negotiations with Israel with United States mediation, was not possible.<sup>147</sup>

Even before Sadat surprised the Carter administration and traveled to Israel to speak in front of the Knesset in November 1977, the Syrian-Egyptian alliance had practically ended. Sadat knew that he needed to go all the way to sign a peace deal with Israel, as he had charted a path of the secret bilateral disengagement negotiations; Syria also knew that Sadat had sold out the alliance in exchange for improved settlement terms with Israel and the United States. In 1978, Syria and the Arab world lost Egyptian support due to the Camp David Accord, an event that prompted Syria to reconfigure its alliances within the region. \*\*

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<sup>147</sup> NSA Negotiations between King Hussein and Kissinger in Jordan, March 3, 1974, that stated clearly Egypt, Jordan, and the PLO were engaging in peace negotiations, and that there was a deliberate attempt at stalling progress on the Syrian negotiation front. [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01051](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01051)

By 1976, the Egyptian-Syrian alliance was on a downward spiral, while a crisis was brewing between the Maronite Christians and the PLO in neighboring Lebanon. Al-Asad's dismay with the PLO had developed a history by this point. He has opposed its activities in Jordan in 1970 and the increased Fedayeen attacks on Israel from southern Lebanon. This Palestinian activism from Lebanese territory threatened an Israeli invasion into Lebanon, which in turn, threatened to sweep Lebanon from Syria's sphere of influence.<sup>148</sup>

What was even more disturbing for al-Asad was that PLO leader Yasser Arafat was behaving like a head of state and negotiating secretly with Israel and the United States following the 1973 Yom Kippur War. If the PLO has been able to succeed in striking a deal with Israel, and if Egypt chose the same path, there would be little political leverage left for Syria during its negotiations with Israel. Syria needed the Palestinian card now that Egypt had charted its own path. If the PLO was defiant and unwilling to coordinate with the Syrians, Syria needed to weaken it and to replace its leadership.<sup>149</sup>

President Elias Sarkis of Lebanon did not have an established military to confront the Palestinian increasingly destabilizing activities against Israel. He also did not have the ability to curb the Palestinian influx into Lebanon from neighboring states, especially after the Black September crisis in 1970. Sarkis also did not want to

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<sup>148</sup> It was important at that time that Syria that Lebanon did not engage in peace negotiations with Israel, although it did have about 250,000 Palestinian refugees, and the headquarters of the leadership of the PLO (post-1948, 1967 wars, and 1970 Jordan crisis).

<sup>5</sup> Al Assad encouraged the entrance of its own Palestinian groups such as al Saiqa and the PFLP-GC into Lebanon, but they were only able to control the Bekaa Valley. These Palestinian factions used the pretext of the willingness of Arafat to negotiate with Israel as a pretext to drive the PLO out of Lebanon.

appear as a Christian president waging war against Muslim “freedom fighters”. After the bloody clashes between the Phalange Party militia and the Palestinians in Ain al-Rummaneh, and the Damour massacre of 700 Maronites, the Maronites of Lebanon called on al-Asad to provide protective forces in January 1976. Legitimized by the Arab League in June 1976, Syria’s military, maintained at 30,000 troops on average, committed itself to an invitational intervention in Lebanon.<sup>150</sup> By 1979, a falling out occurred between Syria and the Christian faction in Lebanon when the Lebanese military attacked the Arab Defense Force (ADF, which was predominately composed of Syrian forces) stationed in east Beirut in February 1978. This was followed by the heavy bombardment of Christian sectors in Beirut by Syrian artillery in July 1978. At that point, Syria switched its alignment to the Shia group Amal<sup>151</sup>. It was vital for al-Asad to exert control over Syria’s immediate environment after it became apparent that Syria was being left out of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s peace plans in 1976.

Iraq had provided forces to aid Syria’s military during the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. When Syria accepted UN resolution 338 that led to a ceasefire in 1973, Iraq withdrew its forces, and tension built between 1973 and 1978, between Iraq and Syria due to the willingness of al-Asad to end the war.<sup>152</sup> The commitment of Egypt to the bilateral peace negotiations with Israel in 1978 drew Syria and Iraq

<sup>150</sup> Naomi Joy Weinberger, *Syria Intervention in Lebanon*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>151</sup> The Amal movement formed in 1974 by Musa al Sadar and Hassan al Hussein in an attempt to rally Lebanese for equality against depriving the Shia communities, mainly in south Lebanon, from economic development. Amal fought against the PLO presence in Lebanon. Syrian troops fought alongside Amal between 1979 and 1989.

<sup>152</sup> Moshe Maoz, *Syria and Israel, From War to Peace Making*.(London: Oxford University Press, 1995).

closer together again, and both tried to foil the Camp David Accord peace negotiations. The Baghdad Arab summit in November 1978 expelled Egypt from the Arab League and extracted financial support for the frontline states in their struggle against Israel. Al-Asad and Iraqi president Ahmed Hassan al Bakr signed a charter of a joint National Action that paved the way for future military unity along with economic and cultural unification between Syria and Iraq.

The Syrian attempt at replacing Egypt with a strategic alliance with Iraq in 1978 did not succeed due to Saddam Hussein's rise to power in 1979. Ahmed Hassan al Bakr, before he was forced to retire by Saddam Hussein in July 1979, encouraged al-Asad to speed up the strategic union between Iraq and Syria because Iraqi Ba'th Party elements, which were against these close relations, were working to undermine it (Dawisha, 2009; McDonald 2009)<sup>153</sup>. After Saddam Hussein seized control in Iraq, an alleged Syrian plot was discovered to overthrow Hussein, and the Syrian-Iraqi unification talks were halted indefinitely (Maoz, 1995).<sup>154</sup>

Iran was paralyzed politically and economically in 1978 due to the revolution against the Shah's repressive regime. Iran's uprising against the Shah was Islamic and anti-Western. Everything the Shah represented, as an American ally, capitalist, pro-modernization, and secular was despised by the majority, the religious, Marxists, and nationalist Iranians alike (Levy, 2010).<sup>155</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation*. Princeton University Press, 2009. Michelle McDonald, *The Kiss of Saddam*. (London: University of Queensland Press, 2009).

<sup>154</sup> Moshe Maoz, *Syria and Israel, From War to Peace Making*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

<sup>155</sup> Janey Levy, *Understanding Iran: Iran and the Shia*. The Rosen Publishing Group, 2010.

By that time, Syria had started to shift its perception of what the United States' role and influence in the Middle East meant as well. For Syria, no longer did the United States represent the honest peace broker al-Asad and Abdul Halim Khaddam, Syria's foreign minister, came to know up close and personal during Kissinger's visits to Damascus between 1974 and 1975. Al-Asad felt betrayed during the Camp David peace negotiations in 1978 and lost Egypt to the Israel and U.S. camp. In 1979, Saddam Hussein, rumored to be backed by the United States, seized power in Iraq and dutifully turned Iraq away from the Soviet Union camp to the United States camp. The Lebanese Maronites, who called on al Assad to save them in 1976 from Palestinian and Druze attacks, were now turning against him in 1978 and had asked for American intervention in Lebanon.

The fall of the Shah, a U.S. ally, and Iran turning to the Soviet camp in 1979 after the success of the Islamic revolution, was a significant event that could not have happened at a more convenient time for al-Asad. Syria immediately recognized the Islamic Republic, only the third country to do so after the Soviet Union and Pakistan. Iran became the perfect and only rational choice for an ally for Syria in 1979 that had the potential of replacing Egypt and Iraq. It turned out that an alliance with Iran was advantageous to Syria on the regional strategic level as well as on a tactical level. The rising political and military assertiveness of the Shia community in Lebanon, headed by Amal in 1979, needed the support of Iran. Syria provided the necessary logistical linkages and support for Amal during the Lebanese civil war. Syria and Iran became geostrategic allies. For Syria, the breakdown of the

Iranian-Israeli partnership<sup>156</sup> against the progressive Arab states, transformed Iran from a supporter of the status quo into a revisionist state seeking to promote anti-imperialism.

Mostafa Chamran Savei was a close adviser to Khomeini and the first defense minister of Iran's post-Islamic revolution. Savei was also one of the founders of the Amal movement, had fought in the Lebanese civil war, and brokered the new alliance between Syria and Iran (Peterson, 2010).<sup>157</sup> Syria and Iran established a new axis in the Middle East, a counterweight to the Saudi-Iraqi axis (at the time) on the one hand that was activated during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), as well as counterweight to American dominance of the region after the shifts of Egypt and Iraq to the American camp in 1979.

The external environment turned against Syrian interests in 1978 and 1979 with unfolding events in Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq. Syria was outside the American sphere and seeking regional partners after the fallout with Egypt and Iraq. Iran shed the American alliance after its outrage by the Shah's exile in the United States and memories of Operation Ajax.<sup>158</sup> Iran represented the ideal ally at the strategic level. The emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 bolstered the Soviet camp in the Middle East region. The United States lost the Shah and gained Egypt.

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<sup>156</sup> One of the signs of the Iranian-Israeli friendship was Iran selling oil to Israel to the tune of 252 thousand barrels per day, NSA, confidential memorandum, by David Patterson, February 5, 1975.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CIR00929](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CIR00929)

<sup>157</sup> Scott Peterson, *Let the Swords Encircle Me: Iran—A Journey behind the Headlines*. Simon and Shuster, 2010.

<sup>158</sup> Operation Ajax, the United States covert operation in Iran in 1953, which overthrew Iran's prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who sought to reduce the absolute rule of the Shah and to nationalize Iran's oil industry.

Syria lost Egypt and Iraq as potential allies in the late 1970s, and it was only natural for Syria to forge a new alliance with Iran.

The United States worked to bring Egypt and Saudi Arabia closer together post-1975 to form a pro-Western axis in the region<sup>159</sup>. For Syria, the trend and the new regional formation were clear. What was apparent was that Syria had to lose hope in Kissinger's promises and carve for itself a regional role not dictated by a peace deal with Israel.

Here is some of Henry Kissinger's charm during his visits to Damascus, talking to Abdul Halim Khaddam on February 13, 1975:

"I'll give the exact status to President Asad. I know it is almost unimaginable to the Syrian mentality, but I'll do nothing behind the back of President Asad and Foreign Minister Khaddam. That is why I came here. I don't want to split the Arabs. Because history is in favor of Arab unity. Even if I succeeded for six months, history will pass me by. So we are not playing games." (NSA, p.2)<sup>160</sup>

While a few days earlier, in a conversation between Henry Kissinger and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and his cabinet, at the Prime Minister's residence in Jerusalem, February 11, 1975:

Moshe Kol: "Do you really believe Sadat is free to have a political interim agreement without any agreement with Syria or a solution to the problem of the Palestinians?"

<sup>159</sup> NSA documents of 1974 and 1975 for Egypt reveal that there had been an active attempt by the United States to coordinate with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Both states paid official visits to the United States in 1974, and the United States addressed both states in White House and State Department memos.

<sup>160</sup> NSA, secret memorandum of conversation between Henry Kissinger and Abdul Halim Khaddam. Damascus, Syria, February 13, 1975  
[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01495](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CKT01495)

Kissinger: "I think yes, but he will certainly say something that will inspire your columnists to flights of outrage. But he will certainly do it." (NSA, p.10)<sup>161</sup>

In a meeting with President Sadat on March 13, 1975, Kissinger expressed the need to separate the agreement with Egypt from the Syrian and Palestinian issues, to which Sadat agreed. Kissinger asserted that the United States considered the Palestinians murderers and did not acknowledge the PLO, and that Israel was not afraid of Syria.<sup>162</sup>

What if Saddam Hussein had not taken the reign of Iraq in 1979 and overthrown Hasan al Bakr and the strategic military and economic planned integration of Iraq and Syria had materialized in 1979? There is a reasonable argument to be made that this Iraq-Syria alliance would have substituted for the loss of Egypt, and it would have decreased Syria's interest in an alliance with Iran thereafter. What if the Camp David accords had failed in 1978 and Egypt had maintained its belligerent status towards Israel? It is logical to see that this would have prompted Egypt and Syria to maintain their strategic alliance and work in concert to pressure Israel to improve multilateral settlement terms for Syria, Egypt, and the PLO. This in turn would have decreased Syria's interest in forging an alliance with Iran in 1980. The external environment was the predominant driving factor prompting Hafez al-Asad to align Syria with an emerging anti-Western state in the region.

<sup>161</sup> NSA, secret memorandum of conversation in Jerusalem on February 11, 1975 between Kissinger and Yitzhak Rabin and his cabinet.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnas&rft\\_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT01492](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT01492)

<sup>162</sup> NSA, secret memorandum of conversation between Kissinger and Sadat on March 13, 1975 in Aswan, Egypt.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnas&rft\\_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT01533](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT01533)



Syria experienced a fundamental readjustment in its foreign policy after the 1973 October War, the loss of Iraq and Egypt, the unsuccessful attempt at peace negotiations with Israel, and the experience with Kissinger's deceptions. Syria needed to construct an alliance with a vision for the region. Syria converged with Iran on a fundamental common understanding that the United States and Israel were deceptive and could not be trusted. Both states understood that the United States was a hegemonic power in the region serving its own interest, with the help of pro-Western Arab states. Since 1979, Syria and Iran had converged to oppose United States intervention in what has since come to be known as the "resistance front."

### ***5.1.2 Internal Consolidation, Religious Turmoil, and Regime Security***

By 1977, Syria's balance of payments had deteriorated. Syria reconsidered its liberal economic policies introduced as part of al-Asad's *Infitah* (open door) agenda. Syria imposed some import restriction on luxury goods, and the private sector was encouraged to produce some consumer goods domestically. However, the public was reassured that there would be no return to socialism or expropriations. Syria enacted anti-corruption laws under the Economic Penalty Law in 1977, which covered offenses such as smuggling, illegal foreign-exchange trade, bribery, and fraud.<sup>163</sup> Al-Asad made it clear that concessions made to the private sector could be revoked, adjusted, or withheld. This tactic became evident during the violent Islamist opposition that began in 1979. To maintain the support of the Damascus

<sup>163</sup> Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p.52.

business community and the bureaucracy, al-Asad lifted some import restrictions in 1980 and ordered 65 percent wage increases for employees in the public sector (Perthes 1995, p. 53).

The founders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1930s, Mustafa al-Siba'i and Muhammad Mubarak al-Tayyib, were acquaintances of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamists in Syria were outraged by Syria's involvement in peace negotiations with Israel between 1973 and 1975, Syria's support for the Maronites in Lebanon against the Palestinians in 1976, and by not being represented in the government, as was the case until 1958. Strikes and violent attacks in Syrian cities continued until March 1980 when the military began to employ overwhelming force against the insurgents. Between 1980 and 1982, the military attacked Muslim Brotherhood strongholds in Aleppo and Hama and enacted Law 49, part of the emergency laws, punishing Muslim Brotherhood membership with death. Thousands of fighters turned themselves in, and the Muslim Brotherhood uprising was defeated after the insurrection of Hama in February 1982 was quelled, with 20,500–30,000 killed. This serious challenge to al-Asad rule by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was said to have been supported by Saddam Hussein and the Gulf States (Kienle, 1990, p.135).<sup>164</sup>

With religious tensions starting to flair in Syria in 1979, aligning with Iran, a country that had just experienced an Islamic revolution, was hoped to have a calming effect on Islamists in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood organization in the Middle East looked up to Iran's successful Islamic experience in 1979 and looked

<sup>164</sup> Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th against Ba'th*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990).

forward to duplicating it in Arab countries. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had a special affection for the Muslim Brotherhood and had translated a number of the books of Sayyid Qutb, one of the Brotherhood's most prominent theoreticians, into Farsi. Qutb was at the center of formulating the Muslim Brotherhood militant ideology during the 1950s and 1960s.

The mutual admiration between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Khomeini quickly fizzled when a Muslim Brotherhood delegation to Tehran in 1980 offered Khomeini the chance to declare himself the Imam of all Muslims if he denounced al-Asad. Khomeini declined, saying that because al-Asad had declared Israel Syria's enemy, all he could do was to facilitate a dialogue between both sides, the Syrian officials and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood representatives. Relations between the Syrian Muslim brotherhood and Iran deteriorated after 1981.<sup>165</sup> The security institutions in Syria expanded under al-Asad. The armed forces increased from 80,000 in 1970 to 400,000 in 1985 (Perthes, 1995).<sup>166</sup> The state security services (al-Mukhabarat), which is part of the Ministry of the Interior but is practically an independent state-security authority, added another 300,000-360,000 full and part-timers<sup>167</sup>. Al-Asad was able to ensure the loyalty of the security apparatuses, military, and the mukhabarat by handing them economic power and allowing them to develop their own corporate interests. The same strategy was enacted in Egypt. Under Anwar al Sadat and Husni Mubarak. There were two predominant military construction companies: Muta' and Milihouse. Together, these

<sup>165</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/iran-hamas-relationship-post-egypt-coup.html> retrieved October, 2013.

<sup>166</sup> Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*. (I.B. Tauris, 1995.)

<sup>167</sup> Middle East Watch, *Syria Unmasked*. (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1991).

two companies consumed half of the government funds assigned to construction companies (Perthes, 1995, p. 147).

Between 1975 and 1980, al-Asad was able to consolidate his power base domestically. The military and bureaucracy supported him and he was able to forge an alliance with the business community of Damascus and Aleppo. Ratib al-Shallah, who headed the Sunni business community delegation that met with Hafez al-Asad, assured al-Asad of the community's full support and allegiance during the 1979-1982 Muslim Brotherhood crisis. After the reelection of Hafez al-Asad in 1984, Ratib al-Shallah honored al-Asad with a traditional Arab garb, placing it on al-Asad's shoulders as a sign of support from the business community in Damascus and Aleppo.<sup>168</sup>

This triangular power consolidation formula based on the security apparatus, bureaucracy, and business community, was maintained throughout Hafez al-Asad's thirty-year rule and continued when his son Bashar took office in 2000.

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<sup>168</sup> Interviews conducted with five businessmen in Damascus who described a vital alliance between Assad the father, and later the son and the business community in Damascus and Aleppo. Among other preferential treatments provided by the administration to the business community, one interviewee described easy access to the top-tier officials of Syria. Damascus, Syria, July 2010.

### 5.1.3 Freedom from Submission to the West

Deflecting American hegemony over the region provided a basis for creating a political alliance between the interests of Iran's turbaned Mullahs, and the secular Western-dressed Ba'thists of Syria. At the regional level, Syria and Iran balanced out the newly formed pro-Western axis in the region: Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Both states found strength in the resolve of each other to resist United States intervention in the region. There was an active theater component for this alliance, namely Syrian troops fighting alongside the Shiite Amal militia in Lebanon's civil war. Al-Asad saw the Islamic revolution as having transformed Iran from an ally of Israel into a partisan of the Arab cause. For al-Asad, this revolution introduced important changes in the strategic balance in the Middle East in which Iran supported the Arabs without hesitation for the sake of liberating Arab land. How could Arabs lose a country like Iran with all its human, military, and economic potential?<sup>169</sup> For Syria, the covert Iranian-Israeli alliance<sup>170</sup> against the progressive Arab states broke down as Iran was transformed from a supporter of the United States dominated status quo into a revisionist state seeking to promote anti-imperialism.

When Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, al-Asad contended that this was the wrong war, that it would exhaust both states and squander their resources, and that it diverted Arabs from the real enemy. Al-Asad sided decisively with Iran, cut

<sup>169</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Regional Penetrated Region*. (London: Routledge, 1997). Moshe Maoz, *Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>170</sup> One of the signs of the Iranian-Israeli friendship was Iran selling oil to Israel to the tune of 252 thousand barrels per day, NSA, confidential memorandum, by David Patterson, February 5, 1975.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CIR00929](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CIR00929)

the trans-Syrian pipeline in 1982, and refused several attempts by King Fahd to reconcile with Saddam Hussein in an effort to isolate Iran in the 1980s.<sup>171</sup>

On November 7, 1980, Damascus Radio aired a presidential address in which al- Asad stated that Saddam Hussein was being used by imperialist forces to break the anti-imperialist front. He stated that:

...the invasion of Iraq was planned to create a new enemy for the Arab nations, an enemy that was placed at the same level as Israel. This situation would make us (the Arabs) distribute our forces between the front of the real enemy . . . and the Iranian front.

Damascus Radio, November 7, 1980

For al-Asad, alliance with Iran was based on strategic considerations bolstered by mutual convictions about the state of the region, and not a *marriage of convenience*.<sup>172</sup>

#### ***5.1.4 Substituting Egypt and Linking Lebanon***

The furthest consideration from al-Asad's mind was a sectarian dimension in his alliance with Iran in 1980. He considered Iran the only politically acceptable choice for an alliance and the only rational one, given the regional reality of an Egypt-Israel peace accord at Camp David, and Iraq's hostility towards Syria. In 1979, Syria remained the sole frontline state that explicitly declared Israel an enemy. The banner of the Arab-Israel conflict was handed to Syria after Egypt signed the Camp David accords. With Saddam Hussein joining the Egypt-Saudi axis of pro-Western

<sup>171</sup> M. A. Emami, Iran-Arab Relations, *The Journal of Foreign Policy* (Tehran), 1995, 9 (1), pp. 129-164.

<sup>172</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*. (London: Routledge, 1997).

states, a Syria-Iran axis allowed Syria to declare an alternative scenario for the region, which in essence established a “Syrian role” in the Middle East.

Now pan-Arab union ambitions had been removed from Syrian foreign policy after the failed experiences of past Arab union attempts in 1961, 1971, and 1978. A strategic alliance with Iran, a country that strived for acceptance in the Arab region on shared Islamic heritage, equipped Syrian foreign policy with the necessary ability to maneuver regionally, especially in its immediate environment Lebanon.

Furthermore, Syria felt a unique obligation to keep the regional focus pointed at Israel. With the help of Iran, Syria helped to keep the Palestinian struggle alive in Arab and western media outlets to keep the pressure on Israel, thereby perhaps extracting better settlement terms to regain the Golan Heights in the future. Iran’s support for Amal, and later Hezbollah in 1988, through Syria was decisive in extracting political rights for the Shia during the Taif Agreement in Saudi Arabia, an agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war in 1989.

At the cognitive level, Hafez al-Asad had very few choices for strategic partnerships that would be politically acceptable to the Syrian political leadership. Overcoming the deep mistrust between Hafez al-Asad and Saddam Hussein was unlikely in 1979. Al-Asad had already accused *backward dark forces* of aiding the Islamist- armed uprising in Syria in 1978 and 1979, and as such, the Gulf States were not acceptable alliance choices either. Egypt was ruled out due to its peace agreement with Israel and close ties with the United States. Thus, Iran was the only viable alliance choice for Syria, and the timing of the Islamic Revolution could not have been any better for Syria in 1979.

## 5.2 Aligning with Iran as an Irrational and Ideological Foreign Policy

Liberal theories discount the possibility that non-democratic states are able of autonomous foreign policy making, in which the decision makers pursue a national interest inspired foreign policy, expressed in limited and attainable (rather than ideological or revolutionary) goals. If the foreign policy of Syria had been guided by solely domestic consideration, and if it were utilized for regime survival and/or to divert attention away from domestic troubles, then Syria would have considered King Fahd's rapprochement and aligned with Saudi Arabia in 1980.

The domestic struggles of Syria, especially the economic deterioration and armed confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood, would have required the Syrian leadership to re-legitimize its stance through an alliance with a Sunni authority in the region. Such an alliance between Saudi Arabia and Syria, for example, would have also guaranteed considerable financial support for Syria's economy.

On a strategic level, such an alliance would have been irrational because it would not have supported Syria's mission in Lebanon, it would not have substituted Egypt as a strategic ally against Israel, and it would not have aided Syria with its rivalry with Iraq. In short, a Saudi-Syrian alliance at the time would have reduced Syria's regional influence and confined it within its borders. The liberal theory prediction of foreign policy behavior of nondemocratic states does not account for a consolidated authoritarian state's ability to tend to its national interests through an independent foreign policy. An alliance with Iran would have been a counterintuitive choice for liberal theorists, especially because at the time, Iran



lacked any ability to provide economic aid to Syria. What Iran was able to offer Syria at the time was a partnership based on strategic principles.

### **5.3 Bandwagoning**

The realists' prediction for a weak state in an anarchic international order is that it would bandwagon with powerful states or great powers to protect and guard its interests and increase its security. In 1979, Syria was in a difficult position: it had lost the ability to maintain its alliance with Egypt or forge an alliance with Iraq, as both turned to the pro-Western camp. No peace deal with Israel had been reached, in addition to which Syria faced military involvement in Lebanon and its internal turmoil. If there were ever a time for Syria to bandwagon with the United States to preserve its threatened sovereignty and security and to save its economy, it would have been in 1979. Yet Syria did not capitulate and bandwagon with the United States in that year. Instead it chose instead to confirm its political independence and autonomous foreign policymaking by aligning with Iran, where both agreed on a long-term strategic position in the Middle East.

## Chapter Six

### Syria and Hezbollah 1990

*We see Syria as a genuine supporter of both Lebanon and the resistance, and we say this not to compliment them—we view Syria as the country most able to lend its support to Lebanon and its people... we will stand at Syria's side as it confronts the dangers that threaten Lebanon, Syria and the entire region.*

—Hassan Nasrallah, As-Safir interview, February 27, 1992<sup>173</sup>

This chapter investigates the factors that led Syria to align with Hezbollah in 1990, when the Lebanese militia transformed itself into a political movement, with a paramilitary.<sup>174</sup> Why did Syria strike an alliance with a Lebanese non-state actor after the end of the civil war in Lebanon? Certain qualifiers need to be discussed to justify Hezbollah as a regional actor with whom Syria might share strategic interests. First, the Taif Agreement signed on October 22, 1989, redistributed power among the various Lebanese factions but left the Lebanese government with a diminished monopoly over the use of force. While Amal fighters were integrated

<sup>173</sup> Nicholas Noe, *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*. (London: Verso, 2007), 73.

<sup>174</sup> Hezbollah started out as an armed breakaway militia from the Amal movement in 1982, when Amal decided on a détente with the Maronite militias. Hezbollah formed and concentrated its armed activism against U.S. and Western presences in Lebanon between 1982 and 1983. Hezbollah fought against Amal and Syrian military attacks on Palestinian refugee camps between 1985 and 1988. For further information on Hezbollah ideology and formation consult Rola Hussainia, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010).  
Samer Shehata, *Islamists Politics in the Middle East: Movements and Change*. (London: Routledge, 2012).  
Joseph Elie al Agha, *Hezbollah's Documents From the 1985's Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

within the Lebanese army after the Taif Agreement, Hezbollah militia was allowed to retain its arms and continue its paramilitary activity, with a significant presence in the southern Beirut neighborhood of al-Dahia al-Janubya and south of Lebanon, as long as Israel was occupying Lebanese territory.<sup>175</sup> Second, Hezbollah reoriented itself domestically and rebranded itself as a political party and social movement. Hezbollah now had a say in domestic and foreign policy making in Lebanon. Third, Hezbollah monopolized the armed presence in the south of Lebanon and maintained territorial control over the area in proximity to the Litani River. Fourth, Hezbollah fighters, around 10,000 including reserves, received professional training from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Lebanese and Iranian camps. Fifth, Hezbollah maintains independent finances and trade agreements with foreign governments, with most of its investments located in Latin America and Central Africa. It also receives advanced weapons shipments from Syria, Iran, Russia, China, and North Korea.

These characteristics qualify Hezbollah as being conceptualized as having the status of a “state within a state”.<sup>176</sup> It is logical to ascertain that Hezbollah’s strategic vision stretches over and beyond the limited objective of liberating occupied Lebanese territory, to forming a geopolitical extension of resistance against oppressive forces (the United States and Israel according to Hezbollah doctrine). This precise mission converges with Iran’s policy orientation and with Syria’s as well.

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<sup>175</sup> In 1990 Israel occupied what it deems the Security Zone, which encompasses the area between the Litani River and the Israel-Lebanese borders, in addition to the Shab’a farms.

<sup>176</sup> Hussain Abdul Hussain, “Hezbollah: A State within a State,” *Current Trends in Islamists Ideology* vol. 8 (Washington: Hudson Institute, 2009).

This chapter will investigate why Hafez al-Asad made the decision to align with Hezbollah in 1990. This chapter tests the ability of neoclassical realism theory to highlight the predominant external and internal factors leading Syrian decision makers to evaluate Hezbollah as a strategic partner. Furthermore, Polyheuristic theory is used to investigate the cognitive and rational steps of decision-making that led to Syria's strategic alignment with Hezbollah. To evaluate the weight of external and internal causal factors, counterfactual arguments will be used to test the causal validity of these factors. In later parts of the chapter, alternative hypotheses will highlight probable alternative models that are equipped to explain foreign policies of weak non-democratic states but do not capture the causal mechanism that led Syria to align with Hezbollah. First alternative hypothesis tests the validity of the liberal theory prediction of foreign policies of non-democratic states. Second alternative hypothesis is designed to test the validity of the structural realist prediction for weak-state foreign policy.

### **6.1 The Decision to Align with Hezbollah**

This section traces the external and internal factors that led Syria to an alliance choice in 1990. What led the Syrian political elite to forge an alliance with Hezbollah toward the end of the civil war in Lebanon in 1990?

#### **6.1.1 External Environment**

The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1956 was created to oppose and contain pro-communist countries, or countries that displayed communist sympathies, such as

Syria at the time.<sup>177</sup> The United States sought the help of Arab states to overthrow the Syrian government in 1957 and later decided to increase military aid to Turkey for a possible military intervention with Syria. In February 1957, Nikita Khrushchev declared that the USSR would be ready to defend Syria in the event of American aggression (Kreutz 2007). The United States supported Nasser's project of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, and Nasser's unrelenting crackdown on communists and communist parties in both Egypt and Syria between 1958 and 1961. When Syria seceded from the United Arab Republic in 1961, the Soviet Union was the first to welcome Syria back as an independent state. The Syrian-Soviet ties had a strong ideological dimension during the Salah Jadeed's era from 1961 to 1970. Al-Asad approached Syrian-Soviet relations in a more business-like manner (Hinnebusch 1989; Kreutz 2007).<sup>178</sup> In many respects, al-Asad's ascendance to power in 1970 was seen as an end to revolutionary politics in Syria and the start of *realpolitik* (Seale 1989; Perthes 1995; Hinnebusch 1997).<sup>179</sup> The Soviet Union

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<sup>177</sup> Syria had an active communist party headed by Khalid Bagdash. After the end of military dictatorships, which had been in place since 1949, Bagdash won a seat for Damascus in the 1954 democratic elections. He became the first communist elected to an Arab parliament.

<sup>178</sup> Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Praeger Security International, 2006).

Raymond Hinnebusch, "Revisionist Dreams, Realist Strategies: The Foreign Policy of Syria," in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, ed. Baghot Korany and Ali Hilal Dessouki (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), PAGE NUMBERS.

<sup>179</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad The Struggle for the Middle East*. (California: University of California Press, 1989).

Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995). Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushirman Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran, Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 1997).

remained Syria's ally after the Corrective Movement of 1970. In fact, more than half of Soviet military aid to Syria was delivered after 1974.<sup>180</sup>

The Soviet Union had a strategic alliance with Syria without being able to direct Syria's foreign policy. Al-Asad described the USSR as Syria's only dependable global ally, one that did not dictate or force Syria to compromise on its own vital interests in the region. Between 1975 and 1985, the Soviet Union was unable to persuade al-Asad not to fight, along with Amal, the PLO-Jumblatt coalition in Lebanon, both of which were supported by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union did very little to thwart the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which threatened the Syrian presence in Lebanon.

Until 1985, Syria was still in the process of pressing the USSR to increase its military aid so it could achieve military parity with Israel. Approaching 1990, Syria started to adjust to the cooling of its relations with the Soviet Union. There was a significant lukewarm atmosphere during al-Asad's visit to Moscow to see Konstantin Chernenko in November 1984 (Devlin 1987, 27).<sup>181</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in March 1985 dramatically changed the relationship between the Soviet Union and Syria.

During al-Asad's visit to Moscow on April 28, 1987, Gorbachev declared that Middle East conflicts should be resolved by political means and not by force. For Syria, it became clear that the USSR no longer accepted the Syrian argument that pointed to

<sup>180</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Also see: *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1972-1982 and 1985*.

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/185658.pdf>  
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/185659.pdf>

<sup>181</sup> John Devlin, *Syria in Security in the Middle East: Regional Change and Great Power Strategies*, ed. Samuel E. Wells and Mark A. Bruzonsky (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

the scope of U.S. military aid to Israel. The possibility of military parity with Israel became impossible after 1987.

Syria did not wait until the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union to readjust and reconfigure its foreign policy. Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies between 1985 and 1989 gave the Syrian establishment a clear idea where the future of great powers in the region was heading. It was clear by now that USSR had dramatically decreased influence internationally. What Syria needed to do was forge ties with rising powers, however small, in its area of influence, i.e. Lebanon, while it could.

The Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, resumed their relations with Syria after 1972. King Khalid stated in 1975 that Saudi Arabia supported Syria's presence and role in Lebanon.<sup>182</sup> During King Fahd's reign, which began in 1982, both leaders, al-Asad and King Fahd, developed a special bond that allowed their countries to advocate for and implement the Taif Agreement that ended the civil war in Lebanon in October 1989.<sup>183</sup>

Al-Asad was able to enhance and maintain exceptional relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. Iran and Saudi Arabia were on opposing ends at that time, as Saudi Arabia supported Iraq during the war against Iran from 1980 to 1988. King Fahd and al-Asad were the main drafters of the Taif Agreement, which legitimized the presence of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and guaranteed that Hezbollah not be disarmed, a position supported by Iran.

<sup>182</sup> Andrew Crain, *The Ford Presidency: A History* (McFarland, 2009).

<sup>183</sup> "No News is Good News," *Al Ahram Weekly Online* 745 (2-8 June 2005): <http://weekly.ahram.org/2005/745/re8.htm>

By 1982, Syria had been involved in the Lebanese civil war for six years.<sup>184</sup> The Maronites' support for Syrian presence declined by the late 1970s; in 1982, Syria switched alliances and fought alongside the Amal movement when Israel invaded south Lebanon. The UN peacekeeping force was called upon by the Lebanese government in August 1982 to oversee the withdrawal of the PLO, which is primarily comprised of U.S. and French forces within a Multinational Force (MNF). The UN mediation and subsequent agreement brokered by Philip Habib, the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, also threatened the presence of Syrian forces.<sup>185,186</sup>

Israel's invasion changed internal Lebanese politics, emboldening the Phalange Party, and the invasion also changed the regional dynamic of the states

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<sup>184</sup> It is well documented that Hafez al-Assad worked relentlessly during 1975 and 1976 to mediate between the PLO and the Lebanese government. These efforts were recognized by the United States. An NSA secret Kissinger memorandum dated March 15, 1976, acknowledged that Syria was trying to reach a peaceful resolution to the presidential crisis. [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnas&rft\\_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT01912](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CKT01912) (NOTE TO AUTHOR: What is this link?)

Al Assad could not allow the collapse of Lebanon, which represented Syria's immediate security environment. Al-Assad rationalized his intervention by stating that the defeat of the Christian militias against the PLO would invite Israeli intervention. A Christian defeat would also cause the partition of Lebanon along factional lines, which would create a Christian state to the western border of Syria that would be naturally pro-West and pro-Israel. See Itmar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon. 1970-1985*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>185</sup> Alfred Grey and Timothy Geraghty, *Peacekeepers at War: Beirut 1983-The Marine Commander Tells His Story* (London: Potomac Books, 2009).

<sup>186</sup> In October 1982, the United States committed to helping Lebanon rid itself of the PLO and Syrian presence and restore Lebanese political and economic institutions. See NSA document dated October 28, 1982.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnas&rft\\_dat=xri:dnas:article:CPD01681](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnas&rft_dat=xri:dnas:article:CPD01681)

The Beirut barracks bombings in October 23, 1983, reversed American involvement in Lebanon and changed the rules of engagement of American forces in the Middle East. See NSA document dated October 28, 1983.

<http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/nsa/documents/PD/01761/all.pdf>



involved in the crisis. The Phalange was accused of aiding and welcoming the Israeli forces, cementing their opposition to the Syrian presence in Lebanon. The Phalange party leader and commander of the Lebanese forces militia, Bashir Gemayel, formed a government and was elected president in August 1982. Gemayel was emboldened by Israel's invasion of the south, which threatened the PLO, his enemy, and he had the Western backing to reestablish the Phalange authority and fight against the Syrian army, whose actions had been termed the "Syrian occupation" by that time. Syria returned to Beirut in 1987, where it had been driven out in 1983.

The Amal movement's decision to stop resisting the Israeli advance in the south and join a "national salvation government" eventually created a chasm within Amal's ranks and gave birth to Hezbollah. Syria differed with Amal on joining the national salvation government, and Amal plunged into a savage war of camps with the Palestinians that lasted from 1985 to 1988.

The only Lebanese faction that perceived Israeli and U.S. forces as a threat at that point was Hezbollah. Hezbollah and Syria evaluated regional redistribution of power in a similar sense. In 1985, Hassan Nasrallah became the chief of Bekaa Valley for Hezbollah, a geographical region parallel to the Syrian-Lebanese border. Bekaa was a security hub for the Syrian army as well.

Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's president from 1989 to 1997, insured the survival of Hezbollah by coordinating with the Syrians to draft the Taif Agreement and by gaining American guarantees. In a secret phone call, Rafsanjani told President George H.W. Bush that he feared Syrian retribution against Hezbollah after the release of western hostages in Lebanon. The Syrians, Rafsanjani claimed, would try

to eliminate Hezbollah to restore Amal as the predominant Shia group (NSA).<sup>187</sup> This claim was made to extract the American blessing to keep Hezbollah operating as a political entity in Lebanon.

It was already understood that Amal would cease to exist as an armed militia after 1989 because the Taif Agreement stated that the Amal's militiamen would join the Lebanese army, while Hezbollah would be allowed to exist as an armed militia with a political presence in the Lebanese cabinet. It is logical for the Syrians to have coordinated their partnership with Hezbollah, with Iranian blessings, well before 1989, because both by then were the only two armed entities in Lebanon, in addition to the Lebanese army and Israel in the south.<sup>188</sup> The only sticking point was that the United States needed intermediaries to release the hostages held by Hezbollah in 1989, 1990, and 1991. Along with Syria, Rafsanjani played that role and extracted American approval of Hezbollah's position in Lebanon in the meantime.

The strategic resistance axis of Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria was officially born in 1989. This alliance proved durable, but more importantly it allowed Syria the necessary maneuvering space to maneuver and navigate the turbulences of the

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<sup>187</sup> See NSA, Secret Cable dated March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1990, stating that the Iranians needed American guarantees that Hezbollah will survive as a political entity after the release of the hostages. [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CIG01269](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CIG01269)

The hostages remained the main contentious point through which both Syria and Iran cemented their presence in Lebanon, after the Taif Agreement in 1989, via the hostage crisis. See NSA document, heavily excised, dated August 1991. [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CTE01039](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CTE01039)

<sup>188</sup> The Taif Agreement also allowed the Palestinians to remain armed within the confines of the refugee camps in Lebanon.

1990s, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, peace negotiations during the Madrid Peace conference, and the bilateral peace negotiations with Israel between 1994 and 1998.<sup>189</sup> Furthermore, by keeping control over Lebanon between 1991 and 2005, Syria maintained the position that the two countries would move in parallel in any peace negotiations with Israel, which in turn improved Syria's bargaining power.<sup>190</sup>

The shift in the structure of the international system in 1990 cannot be undermined by exaggerating Syria's foresight and strategic hedging by creating closer relations with China in 1985. The questions then become: What if the Soviet Union's military and economic power had not deteriorated in the 1980s? What if the USSR had maintained its ideological commitment to the "oppressed nations in their struggle for freedom from imperialist forces"? There is a reasonable argument to be made that Syria would have been content with a strategic superpower alliance with the USSR, and that the need to buffer its immediate security spheres would have not been a priority in the 1990s. What if Israel had not invaded Lebanon in 1982 and had not subsequently withdrawn its forces and occupied Lebanese territory to the south of Litani River, in addition to Shab'a farms, until its unilateral withdrawal in 2000? This counterfactual would call into question the creation of Hezbollah itself, which justifies its existence because of Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanese territory.

<sup>189</sup> By 1991, Syria was able to exert control over the PLO, which increased Syria's political leverage going into the Madrid peace talks in October 1991. NSA document dated May 1, 1991, stating Syria's success in exerting control over the PLO.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CTE01034](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CTE01034)

<sup>190</sup> Samir Kassir, "A Polity in an Uncertain Regional Environment," in *Lebanon in Limbo: Post-War Society and State in an Uncertain Regional Environment*, ed. Theodor Hanf and Nawaf Salam (Berlin: Baden Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2009).

### 6.1.2 Domestic Consideration, Economic Imperatives, and Regime Security

Having survived a coup perpetrated by his brother Rifat al-Asad in 1984, Hafez al-Assad concentrated on solidifying his power base domestically during the latter half of the 1980s. The three strategic components of this objective were, as was the case during the Corrective Movement in 1970, the Syrian business community, the bureaucracy, and the military. There was a significant consideration for the Syrian business community and the military in Syria's aim of maintaining its influence over Lebanon and consequently aligning with Hezbollah to reach that objective.

Lebanon provided the Syrian business community access to the relatively developed financial infrastructure of Beirut, Lebanese private banks, and a connecting hub between Europe, the Gulf, and North Africa. For the business community in Damascus, Beirut was much closer commercial port with better-developed docking facilities than the Syrian ports of Latakia and Tartus. With the growing holdings of Lebanese banks and the increasing instability in Lebanon, the Syrian armed forces created conditions in which the banking sector could return to relative normality in the 1990s. By then, the economic and business ties between the Syrian business community and the world through Lebanon made maintaining Syrian influence in Lebanon that much more vital (Lawson 1996).<sup>191</sup>

Maintaining control over Lebanon, in coordination with Hezbollah, allowed a steady flow of Syrian labor into Lebanon that averaged 200,000 workers in the

<sup>191</sup> Fred Lawson, *Why Syria Goes to War*. (NY: Cornell Studies in Political Economy, 1996).

1990s and reached 500,000 Syrian workers in 1995.<sup>192</sup> In essence, Syria shared in Lebanon's free market policies, and it relieved Syria's staggering unemployment. During the 1990s, Syrian incomes annually remitted to Syria averaged \$1 billion.<sup>193</sup> Corruption was rampant in post-war Lebanon. There are estimates that 25% of the GDP was diverted to Lebanese and Syrian officials as part of loan money, private investments, and assorted illegal practices. The Syrian security apparatus headed by Ghazi Kanaan had a security and economic component overseeing and coordinating Syrian economic interests in Lebanon, with Abdul Halim Khaddam, who oversaw the Lebanese file, and Hikmat Shihabi who was the Chief of Staff of the Syrian army between 1974 and 1998. In turn, clientelism in Syria was not confined within Syria but extended into Lebanon during the 1990s.<sup>194</sup>

Table 3 provides a perspective on the volume of trade between Syria and Lebanon in the 1990s, along with Syria's other two largest Arab trading partners, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>192</sup> Syrian officials who oversaw the Lebanese files, Abdul Halim Khaddam, coordinated the labor flow with Rafik al Hariri who undertook the largest rebuilding efforts in Lebanon by that time.

See John Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (California: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>193</sup> Chalcraft, *Invisible Cage*, 143–144.

<sup>194</sup> For further details on Syrian economic interests in Lebanon, see Gary Gambil, "Syria after Lebanon: Hooked on Lebanon," *The Middle East Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (2005).

Also see UN 2001 corruption assessment report on Lebanon, estimating the loss of 1.5 billion annually, or 10% of GDP in bribes and kickbacks.

**Table 3. Syrian Trade with Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Egypt during 1990s**

	Lebanon		Saudi Arabia		Egypt	
	Import	Export	Import	Export	Import	Export
1992	519351	4516345	465106	1498098	481392	189777
1993	733353	3717797	530533	1729161	611016	144345
1994	618241	4376141	841701	2198453	779435	250391
1995	635639	3469419	875757	2188254	782369	239367
1996	634814	2487932	1022980	2176404	928857	235780
1997	291824	3702373	1286747	2388965	558158	342213
1998	410659	2778556	1021687	2632685	640803	328855

\*Value is in "000" Syrian pounds.

\*\*Source is the National Statistics Center in Damascus. These numbers were obtained from the *Foreign Trade by Country and International Blocks' Tables under Foreign Trade between 1992-1998*.

Al-Asad's domestic political message suffered greatly during the 1980s. Syrian society perceived Syrian military activities as directed against Palestinian activism in Lebanon and that, during the Lebanese civil war between 1985 and 1988, Syrian forces were either standing idly by or were involved in the fighting against the PLO. Images of the massacres of Palestinians had a grave negative impact, especially the ones of Sabra and Shatilla. Syria's image suffered domestically and regionally by the late 1980s.

Hezbollah continued its military operations against the Israeli and South Lebanese Army (SLA) forces stationed in the south and the Bekaa Valley between 1989 and 2000. These operations legitimized the continued presence of Syrian troops and intelligence apparatuses in Lebanon. When Hezbollah emerged as a

rising power against Israel's presence, and against the short sale of Palestinian rights, Syria saw an opportunity to reconfigure its political message by aligning with Hezbollah.

Aligning with Hezbollah served to repackage the Syrian agenda in Lebanon, and regain some of the approval from the Syrian public.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, aligning with Hezbollah improved Syria's relations with Iran, improved Syrian negotiation leverage during hostage's negotiations, and improved Syria's political leverage during Madrid Peace Conference. Syria's alliance with Hezbollah revived the political message of "Israel the Enemy" in the region, which allowed Syria to push for better settlement terms in addition to its role as the peace broker holding vital keys either to stall or advance the peace process.

### 6.1.3 The Axis of Resistance and Regional Security

The year 1990 was a year of transformation. The world transformed from a bipolar to a unipolar order, and the United States emerged as the unmatched superpower. It was *an opportune time* for al-Asad to carve a regional position for Syria. A regional position that differentiated it from the "moderate Arab states," yet was malleable enough not to stand out in opposition to the west, while having just lost the Soviet Union. Small-scale alliances were the order of the day.

Aligning with Hezbollah restored the resistance message of Syria in the region, while projecting an image that this alliance was and is confined within Lebanese borders. Lebanon remained Syria's immediate security environment.

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<sup>195</sup> Al-Assad supported Rafik al-Hariri during his rebuilding efforts of Lebanon, especially Beirut, during the 1990s. Slowly, al-Hariri became the spokesperson for the Sunni community in Lebanon and by extension al-Assad's support for al-Hariri reflected well on the Sunni community, especially the business community in Syria.

Stabilizing and controlling Lebanon was a security imperative for al-Asad. Such coordination between Hezbollah and Syria did not appear to be a threat. To the contrary, it served practical as well as strategic purposes. Syria was able to control Palestinian activities in Lebanon and, in fact, pushed them, with the Lebanese army efforts, back into the Ayn al-Hilwa camps. Syrian officials became the liaison and mediators during the hostage crisis. Furthermore, Syria expanded its influence in Lebanese politics when Hezbollah started to produce candidates for parliament during elections in 1992 that were able to win seats consistently.

While Syria established closer relations with predominantly Shia Hezbollah movement, Syria's relations with Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia and King Fahd, were exemplary in 1990s. In addition to highlighting al-Asad's finely tuned balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia at the time, improved relations with Saudi Arabia also signified that Syria's support and coordination with Hezbollah were perceived as stabilizing factors by predominately powerful Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia. This in a sense negates the factional confrontational ideological motivation behind Syria's strategic partnership with Hezbollah.

#### **6.1.4 The Deterioration of Great Power alliance and Regional Insurance**

The closest circle around Hafez al-Asad at the time included Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Ghazi Kanaan, and Hikmat Shihabi. Al-Asad had entrusted these three men with state affairs since the 1970s, and they were put in charge of the Lebanese file. They were also ideological in the sense that Lebanon was seen as a natural extension of greater Syria. Khaddam, frustrated with Lebanese politics in the mid-1970s, declared that, if greater Lebanon could not function, the solution was not to



shrink it to Mount Lebanon around the city of Beirut, but for Syria to absorb everything. Lebanon in the 1990s was described as a fragmented country with all its political pieces linked via a Syrian thread.<sup>196</sup>

After the Taif Agreement, al-Asad decided to maintain control over Lebanon and dealt directly with the Lebanese powerbrokers Hariri and Hezbollah, in addition to Syria's traditional ally, Amal. Abd al-Halim Khaddam supported Rafiq Hariri, stating that he was a "prime minister who is capable of bringing foreign aid and loans to help stabilize Taif."<sup>197</sup>

With the major power shifts internationally and Middle Eastern region, maintaining control over the immediate security environment became a strategic imperative for al-Assad. His three appointed officials, all Sunni, coordinated economic and security activity with the Lebanese officials and business community while preserving and refraining from aggravating factional sensitivities.

## 6.2 Aligning with Hezbollah as Irrational and the Ideological Motivations

Liberal international relations theories would have explained this alliance as an ideological alliance among the minority Alawi population, an offshoot of Shiism, controlled Syria (via an authoritarian state), and the Shia Hezbollah, an ideological revisionist non-state actor in Lebanon. This explanation would in turn entrust the motivations behind this alliance in the explanatory power residing in "ideology." The weakness imbedded in using ideology as the explanatory factor in foreign policy and alliance formation has been discussed extensively in chapter two.

<sup>196</sup> Ghassan Charbil in *al Wasat* Newspaper, February 3, 1997.

<sup>197</sup> Fu'ad Dabul in *al Anwar Daily*, Beirut, March 23, 1992.

If, on the other hand, Syria's foreign policy was determined solely by domestic considerations, then the suitable ally would have been the United States. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the pronounced failures of socialist and communist economic policies, and given that the Syrian public sector had stagnated in the 1980s and unemployment and inflation soared, aligning with the United States would have ushered in much-needed security loans, foreign aid, and foreign direct investment. Syria was guided not only by its domestic consideration, but also by the immediate external security environment, thereby making Hezbollah a logical part of Syria's economic, security, and political agenda in its immediate sphere of influence.

### **6.3 Bandwagoning**

The disruptive shift in the balance of power and the end of the bipolar order in 1990 is the ideal setting to test the bandwagoning prediction for weak states within the structural realism model. The United States emerged as the sole superpower in 1990, and declared material and ideological victory over the Eastern bloc camp. The Middle Eastern region, a traditional stage for power rivalry between the Western and Eastern camps during the Cold War, left some states with increased security, namely the pro-Western states, and some with less security. If there were a time for Syria to declare its shift to the pro-Western, pro-American camp it would have been 1990. Yet Syria kept stressing the region's right for self-determination, refusing the right of great power to intervene in the region's affairs.

Syria remained steadfast in its opposition to Israel's expansionist intentions in the region both regarding Lebanon and occupied Palestinian territory. Syria also

continued the non-alignment rhetoric while stressing cooperation for what was best for the Middle Eastern region, as far as increasing inter-Arab economic, political, and security cooperation. One might argue that the normative consistency in Syrian foreign policy might hide a practical pivot toward the Western camp by simply synchronizing Syrian foreign policy maneuvers with policy preferences of the United States. The question then becomes, to what extent can that be called bandwagoning?" I propose that this was and is the foreign policy maneuverability available to a weak state that craves security in an anarchic system. While a clear positional shift was available to the Syrian decision makers in 1990, it was not necessary on a strategic level.

Partnering with Hezbollah in Lebanon goes against the bandwagoning prediction for a weak state given the security environment of the Middle East and the recalibration of power on the world stage in 1990. Hezbollah was and remains anti-*status quo* and maintains strong military and political ties with Iran. Syria worked on strengthening its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah at a time when realist theories would have predicted that Syria would declare a shift to the pro-Western camp.

## Chapter Seven

### Syria Joining the First Gulf War Coalition in 1990

This chapter investigates the factors that led Syria to join the international coalition led by the United States to expel the Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1990 and 1991. I argue that joining the Western-led coalition was not the objective of Syrian foreign policy at the time; rather, it was a strategic byproduct of the Syrian-Saudi-Egyptian axis that started in 1989 because of a relatively stable Lebanon.

Legitimizing the presence of Western forces in the Gulf region necessitated Syria's involvement in the multilateral military buildup, although Syria insisted on solving the matter among Arab states without American interference. A number of Gulf state delegations made trips to Damascus before and during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait to soften Hafez al-Asad's position, promising that the forces would leave once the mission was accomplished. These delegations solidified the Saudi-Syria-Egypt axis and later coordinated the Arab response to the Kuwait occupation. Having Syria support the liberation effort isolated Saddam Hussein even further and added much-needed legitimacy to the international multilateral effort. Egypt and the Gulf states were traditionally pro-American Arab states; hence, their bandwagoning with the United States' efforts was expected. Syria, on the other hand, was the legitimacy card that added strategic leverage to the Desert Storm operation.

This case is significant, although it does not showcase a strategic alliance. The stark international structural shift, with the end of the bipolar system, destabilized

pro-Soviet states. Eastern European countries, for example, experienced a wave of democratization, and pro-Western polities began to take shape in the former communist states. It is of particular interest to evaluate the regional standing of pro-Soviet states in the Middle Eastern region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. What made states like Syria withstand the destabilizing effect of losing Soviet backing? I propose that Syrian foreign policy maneuvers in 1989 and 1990 solidified alliances regionally to secure Syria's immediate environment and allowed for flexible cooperation with the Arab Gulf states. Syria's cooperation during Desert Storm was merely a natural progression toward the axis formation of Syria-Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

This chapter investigates the contrast of Syria's choice to align with Hezbollah, which declared the United States and Israel as its enemies in 1990, on one hand, and not bandwagon with the United States and become a pro-Western state after the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the other. Syria made no demands on the US to join the pro-Western camp in exchange for participation in the United States' military efforts. Syria made no demands on the US remove it from the long list of states supporting terrorism, and start the pro-Western socialization process. I see an area that needs to be investigated and understood as an extension of understanding Syrian foreign policy and alignment preferences during that period.

The chapter begins with a closer examination of the external and internal factors motivating Syria's decision to join the coalition in 1990. Next, it evaluates the options that were available to Hafez al-Asad when he made his decision to join the coalition. The Syrian decision to join the coalition is evaluated through the

neoclassical realism theory and Polyheuristic theory. An alternative hypothesis is then provided regarding the liberal logic of foreign policy conduct of nondemocratic states. Finally, the chapter examines the second alternative hypothesis and prediction put forth by structural realism for weak state behavior in an anarchic system.

## **7.1 The Decision to Join the Coalition**

This chapter traces the process by which Syria ended up making the decision to join the coalition led by the United States in August 1990. Why did Syria decide to join the Western-led coalition to expel the Iraqi forces from Kuwait?

### **7.1.1 External Environment**

Syria's immediate security concerns in Lebanon were under control by 1990. The Taif agreement legitimized the Syrian military presence in Lebanon, and the Syrian Hezbollah coordination strengthened Syria's alliance with Iran. Iran, in turn, began to recover from the Iraq–Iran war, that had lasted from 1980 to 1988. Syria readjusted regionally by repairing its relations with Egypt, which had frayed after Syria's condemnation of Egypt's separate peace deal with Israel in 1978. Syria reestablished diplomatic relations with Egypt in 1989.

The end of the Cold War coincided with a reconfiguration of Syrian–Russian relations. President Gorbachov was dealing with intense internal turmoil as nationalists swept control of the central Soviet republics in 1990 which, ultimately contributed to the collapse and dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

(USSR) in December 1991. Due to these developments, Syria expanded its relations with China, especially in fields of military aid and technology.<sup>198</sup>

Syria actively established an immediate and reliable Eastern (China) substitute for the Soviet Union.<sup>199</sup> Between Chinese official visits to Syria in 1989 and Syrian official visits to China in 1990, both countries came to strategic and mutually beneficial understandings whereby Syria had access to military technology and China had access to hard currency. China did, however, cooperate with the United States in its Middle East arms control initiative. China also supported the

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198. An NSA secret information memorandum, dated March 13, 1992, provided insights into the extent of Syrian-Chinese cooperation regarding military aid and missile production plants in Aleppo and Hama.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01516](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01516)

199. An NSA document (a secret cable dated March 16, 1990) stated that Syria-China relations were improving. It also stated that China sold 3-Megawatt Reactors to Damascus and was probably going to provide M-9 SSM.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01272](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01272)

An NSA document (confidential cable, dated September 27, 1989) reported Chinese vice-minister Qian Qichin's visit to Syria.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01230](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01230)

An NSA document (confidential cable, dated June 8, 1990) noted Syria's Zuheir Masharqa's (one of three vice-presidents) visit to China.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01273](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01273)

Richard Bitzinger, "Chinese Arms Production and Sales in the Third World," NSA, 1991. Provides some insight on the United States' heightened worries about Chinese military aid activities in Third World countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01335](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01335)

UNSC sanctions against Iraq and played a role in the South Asian nonproliferation discussions during the 1990s.<sup>200</sup>

With China serving as a substitute for the Soviet Union; Lebanon under Syrian control; and exceptional relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt, Syria emerged relatively stable and secure in its immediate regional environment in 1990. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the timing could not have been better for Syria. Although Syria avoided compromising its anti-imperialist principles by heading further east and establishing strategic relations with China, it could not escape the geopolitical realities of the moderate Arab states like the Gulf countries, which had the potential of increasing their economic aid and political support for Syria during the looming peace conference with Israel.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, Syria was swift in condemning the invasion and calling on Iraqi forces to leave Kuwait before any discussions about grievances between Kuwait and Iraq could take place.<sup>201</sup> The Syrian army was put on high alert and was redeployed along the Syrian–Iraqi border. For Syria, this was a repeated scenario of the earlier Iraq invasion of Iran in 1980. In both cases, it was a wasteful war that merely wasted Arab capabilities and resources. Furthermore, such forceful territorial acquisitions by an Arab state, al-Asad argued, would undermine the Arab argument of the illegality of Israel’s

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200. NSA press guidance dated June 7, 1991.  
[http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsc&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01403](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsc&rft_dat=xri:dnsc:article:CCH01403)

201. Damascus Domestic Service, *Ministry Demands Iraq’s Immediate Withdrawal*, August 4, 1990 (FBIS-NES-90-151).



acquisition of Arab land by force.<sup>202</sup> Al-Asad's inter-Arab cooperation in condemning Iraq's actions spoke of an established Syria that assumed a leadership role alongside Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Al-Asad called for an immediate emergency Arab summit with explicit support from Hosni Mubarak and King Fahd. The Cairo summit of the Arab League's foreign ministers convened on August 3, 1990, and successfully adopted a resolution condemning the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and calling for the unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait.<sup>203</sup> A summit of the heads of state followed on August 10, 1990, in Cairo, Syria adopted a resolution adding to the previously agreed-upon resolutions a call to Arab forces to deploy to protect the territory of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States from further Iraqi aggression.<sup>204</sup>

From the Syrian standpoint, this was an intra-Arab matter where the Arab regional organization—the Arab League—had a clear mandate of preventing a member state from encroaching on the territory of another member state by force. Syria wanted to activate this mandate and spearheaded the mobilization of military action against Iraq from the outset. It joined the international coalition later which would prove to be a continuation of rather than a shift in its foreign policy toward the invasion of Kuwait.

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202. "Al Assad Comments on Invasion, Summits Resolution" (Cairo MENA, August 11, 1990). (FBIS-NES-90-157).

203. "Syria al Shara' Approves" (Cairo MENA, August 4, 1990). (FBIS-NES-90-151).

204. "Foreign Ministers Study Draft Resolution" (Cairo MENA, August 10, 1990). (FBIS-NES-90-156).

In joining the ultimate buildup of the international coalition after Saudi Arabia and Kuwait evoked their strategic alliances with the United States and Great Britain, Syria saw a multifaceted opportunity to expand its regional influence. First, Syria would solidify its relations with Saudi Arabia, as demonstrated by a token of Saudi appreciation that came in the form of a \$2 billion grant.<sup>205</sup>

Syria strove to consolidate its power in Lebanon, and the Maronites, headed by General Michel Aoun, stood in his way. After Syria joined the coalition, Ambassador Edward Djerejian and James Baker gave al-Asad the go ahead to crush Aoun's forces and drive him into exile.<sup>206</sup> James Baker's close communication with al-Asad and Faruq al-Shara during the Gulf War and afterward, especially in preparation for the Madrid peace talks, bore some resemblance to Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy in Syria in the 1970s.<sup>207</sup>

Although Syria maintained its status as a state sponsor of terror, a State Department list Syria had joined in 1979,<sup>208</sup> its cooperation helped lift the European economic sanctions upheld by the European Economic Community (Hinnebusch 1997, 222). With an established military (approximately five hundred thousand enlisted men), Syria worked toward providing continued security for the Arab Gulf

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205. Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria's Role in the Gulf War Coalition," in *Friends in Need: Burden Sharing in the Gulf War*, ed. A. Bennett, J. Lepgold, and D. Unger (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 222.

206. Robert Rabil, *Syria, the United States and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 83.

207. James A. Baker III and Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace 1989–1992* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1995).

208. During the Reagan administration, Syria was isolated by the United States for much of the 1980s.

States. The Damascus Declaration after the end of the Gulf war was an agreement that established an alliance between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt, and Syria. This agreement, however, fell apart in the summer of 1991 when the GCC declared that it did not want Syrian forces to remain on its soil.<sup>209</sup>

The decision to join the international coalition was a natural progression of Syria's position the instant Iraq's aggression against Kuwait transpired. Saddam Hussein was Syria's foe who had wrongfully engaged Iran in a wasteful war for eight years. Iraq continued its military aggression against an Arab state, but this time Syria was in a position to invoke an Arab League mandate to restore the territorial status quo—by force if necessary. The Gulf states were in a strategic alliance with the United States and Britain, and therefore both the Arab mandate and the international coalition headed by the United States converged to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi forces and prevent further Iraqi aggression against the Gulf states.

Joining the coalition was not an act of bandwagoning because Syria was fully engaged in preparations for the ultimate Soviet demise. By 1987, Syria strategically headed further east and strengthened its relations with China. Syria reestablished its relations with Egypt in 1989 and consolidated its power base in Lebanon in 1990. Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were strong and developed into a strategic partnership throughout the 1990s. Joining the coalition proved Syria's consistency in its pragmatic foreign policy; however, it had to emphasize that

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209. Gregory Aftandilian, *Egypt's Bid for Arab Leadership: Implications for U.S. Policy* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993), 7.

Syria did not seek to destroy Iraq's infrastructure, declaring that the only party that would benefit from the destruction of Iraq were the "Zionists."<sup>210</sup>

Hafez Al-Asad met with President George Bush in Geneva on November 23, 1990. The meeting lasted for three hours, after which Bush was able to convince al-Asad to commit Syrian troops to defensive operations, but al-Asad refused to commit troops in cross-border offensive operations. President Bush also promised to find a lasting resolution to the Arab-Israel conflict based on UN Security Council resolutions 338 and 242.<sup>211</sup> In a separate meeting with James Baker, al-Asad insisted that Syria was only required to defend Saudi Arabia's sovereignty and international borders, and that Syrian public opinion would turn against al-Asad if Syrian forces engaged in offensive operations against an Arab state.<sup>212</sup>

After meeting with Bush and Baker, al-Asad had to expend a lot of effort to convince Iran's Rafsanjani of the wisdom of joining the coalition, assuring him that the American forces would leave the Gulf region once the liberation of Kuwait was complete. Iran agreed to do its part in carrying out the sanctions against Iraq. Al-Asad visited Iran in September 1990 to assure Iran that Syria was not abandoning the alliance and joining a pro-Western coalition. Nevertheless, Iran continued to express its fears that the United States was not there to liberate Kuwait but to

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210. Damascus Domestic Services, *Israel Fears Syrian-Iraqi Solidarity*, September 2, 1990 (FBIS-NES-90-174).

211. Baker and DeFrank, *Politics and Diplomacy*, 546.

212. *Ibid.*, 550.

dominate the region and support Israel.<sup>213</sup> Joining the coalition had clear external reasons for Syria, but the decision to join necessitated an intricate balancing act by al-Asad on the domestic front.

### **7.1.2 Domestic Constraints, Power Consolidation, and Regime Security**

By 1990, al-Asad had been in power for twenty years. He had dealt with religious uprisings in 1982 and a military coup perpetrated by his brother in 1984, and he successfully extracted economic aid from Arab states to maintain his tight control over incremental liberation of the Syrian economy. Although the factional makeup of Syrian society proved to be a hindrance to establishing a cohesive state identity, loyalty to the state took the form of loyalty to al-Asad first and foremost. His power base, which consisted of the business community, bureaucracy, and military, proved to be a winning coalition. Al-Asad was adamant about engaging the Regional Command, and Ba'th Party members, as well as trusted personnel without regard to their factional affiliations. Mustapha Tlas and Abd al-Halim Khaddam being his closest advisors at the time. At the same time, al-Asad engaged the larger Alawite community in the military and security apparatus as the gatekeepers of his rule.

Joining the Ba'th Party was a means of obtaining loyalty on the part of the state and obtaining a job on the part of the joining member. Co-opting lawyers, doctors, college professors, and others working in the private or public sector

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213. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Region* (NY: Routledge, 1997), 106.

engendered loyalty and party affiliation. During the 1980s, twenty percent of Syrians obtained a salary from the government.<sup>214</sup>

It was hard to determine the source of al-Asad's ability to secure popular obedience. Was he able to secure legitimacy, or was he able to achieve domination due to his ability to enforce compliance?<sup>215</sup> Al-Asad had a consolidated power base and was free of domestic constraints at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Syria's military, which at the time in 1990 had 500,000 personnel, was not only a sizable army but also a battle-hardened one. The military was experienced in fighting militias and quelling rebellion. The security apparatus was able to stop the demonstrations that erupted in Abu Kamal and Dair al Zur in opposition Syria's joining the coalition against Iraq with the least amount of effort.<sup>216</sup>

Al-Asad was known for making an effort to justify Syrian foreign policy to the public because public opinion needed to converge with the aspirations of the nation's leader. Al-Asad continuously stated that Hussein had furthered Zionist goals in the region since taking power in Iraq in 1979 and that Syria was cooperating with the Arab states to prevent further aggressions by Hussein with the spirit of Pan-Arabism.

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214. Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge, 2001), 80.

215. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1999).

216. There are tribal linkages and intermarriages between families living along the Syria-Iraq border, between the Anbar Iraqi province and Dair al Zur and Abu Kamal Syrian province.

### 7.1.3 Arab Solidarity and Curbing a Regional Threat

The threat of Iraq succeeding in annexing Kuwait, thereby increasing Iraq's threat in the region and endangering the security of the Gulf and of Syria's ally Iran, was not acceptable to Syria. Since its inception in 1949, the Arab League had declared a mandate for Arab states to prevent the aggression of one Arab state against a member state by force. The idea of establishing a coalition against an aggressor state was not an anomaly in Pan-Arabism principles. Intra-Arab cooperation to unite against Iraq was in keeping with Pan-Arab protocol. As some accommodations for Syria materialized in Lebanon, al-Asad viewed joining the coalition as a means of curbing a regional threat—Iraq—and filling the vacuum left by diminishing Iraqi dominance in the region. Syria was also able to exert further control over the Palestinian factions before the Madrid peace conference convened and after their support for Hussein proved to be futile to their interests.

### 7.1.4 The Decision to Join the Coalition

The American administration and George Bush were keen to represent the coalition as having achieved Arab approval and that the US military presence in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf was not at all a hegemonic move by a superpower. The Arab cover for the United States was essential, and Syria was represented as having the quintessential Pan-Arab credentials. Al-Asad understood these American considerations and wanted to represent Syrian forces as cooperative components for stability in the region rather than as a confrontational presence. After the United States Marine barracks were destroyed by a suicide bomber in 1982 and after the United States concluded that Syrian involvement could not be ruled out, a military

confrontation between the United States and Syria ensued in which the United States battleship carrier *New Jersey* fired on Syrian targets, and Syria brought down two military aircrafts<sup>217</sup> The symbolic role fulfilled by the fifteen to twenty thousand Syrian troops engaged the Syrian military with the United States military command in a cooperative environment. In that sense, al-Asad hoped that Syria's military, along with Egypt's, would be entrusted to provide the necessary security for Arab Gulf States. Hence, there was the Damascus Declaration of 1991, which the Gulf states later revoked.

Al-Asad knew that the United States needed Syria's presence not just in a defensive position, as he insisted, but also in an offensive capacity. Al-Asad wanted to get the most out of Syria's symbolic participation. Al-Asad's famous tough negotiation techniques drove James Baker to the brink of exasperation.<sup>218</sup>

On September 12, al-Asad addressed graduating Syrian paratroopers, declaring, "[W]e are not supporting the presence of foreign forces, Syria is not on the side of having foreign forces anywhere in Arab homeland. This is how it was in the past and this is how it is now." The crowd erupted in applause and chants to the life of al-Asad. The Syrian president continued, "[H]owever, our immediate problem is not the foreign forces . . . but what brought the foreign forces in the first place." In case the foreign forces refused to leave after the liberation of Kuwait, al-Asad assured his audience, "[W]e will then be one Arab front without any

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217. Rabil, *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror*, 66.

218. Baker DeFrank, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 389.



disagreements, with means and methods to get these foreigners out of the Arab homeland.”<sup>219</sup>

For al-Asad, joining the coalition was an acceptable option politically—and the only rational option given the external environment at the time. Al-Asad enjoyed a consolidated internal front with minimum domestic constraints, giving him the option to increase Syria’s security in its immediate environment, increase its political leverage during the Madrid peace process, and advance its relations with capital- and resource-rich Arab Gulf states.

## 7.2 Regime Survival

Liberal theories would consider explaining Syria’s decision to join the international coalition headed by the United States as a means to ensure the survival of the regime. Such theories would argue that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria would be hard-pressed to preserve its survival by not opposing the policies of the sole superpower, the United States. As it was not clear in 1991 whether the United States was aiming for regime change in Iraq, it was prudent to ensure regime survival as Syria was not a pro-Western state and was on the list of states sponsors of terrorism. Yet, on closer observation of the regional and internal dynamics that transpired in 1989 and 1990 before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, one can see that Syria was well prepared for the loss of the Soviet Union as an ally. It was on a strong footing in Lebanon and had exceptional relations with the Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. Syria’s stability was ensured by its regional foreign policy long before 1990. Syria’s joining the coalition proved beneficial to Syria as well as to

219. Hafez al Assad, *Al Assad Addressing Syrian Paratroopers* (September 12, 1990, Syrian Arab Television Network). (FBIS-NES-90-178).

the coalition. In addition to having Pan-Arab clout, Syria was able to mediate between the West and Iran to ensure Iran's cooperation in carrying out the economic sanctions against Iraq because Iran trusted no government in the region other than Syria's.

### **7.3 Bandwagoning with the United States after the End of the Cold War**

A realist theory would look at Syria's joining the Western coalition as a clear indicator of the bandwagoning of a weak, nondemocratic state in the face of great regional insecurity following the collapse of the bipolar world order. Upon deeper inspection of Syrian foreign policy shortly prior to 1990, one can discern that Syria, given the clear indications by 1987 that the United States was about to declare victory in its decades-old rivalry with the USSR, made decisive moves to reach out farther east to China. The alignment with non-imperialist states was a cornerstone of Syrian foreign policy, a characteristic of Syrian foreign policy that continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union to the present day.

On a tactical level, however, joining the coalition only furthered Syrian interests in the region without bringing a Syrian-American partnership to fruition. As Syria remained on the State Department's list of terrorism sponsors (which was later expanded to include expressions such as "rogue state" by the Clinton administration in the 1990s), it gained greater leverage in Lebanon and bolstered its cooperation with both Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

## Chapter Eight

### Bashar al-Asad and the Crisis of 2003

*"If Syria appears to be stable it is because nothing moves, nothing changes."*

- Subhi Hadidi, Syrian political writer (went into exile in 1987), Paris, 2002<sup>220</sup>

What prompted President Bashar al-Asad to reaffirm Syria's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah during and after the existential crisis of 2003? How can we understand the continuity in Syria's foreign policy after Bashar al-Asad assumed the presidency in 2000? This chapter will examine Syrian foreign policy during the existential crisis of 2003 after the US invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration presented ultimatums to Syria to comply with the new restructuring of the Middle East. The "New Middle East" agenda of the neoconservative administration did not tolerate tyrants, rouge states and state-sponsors of terrorism. This chapter will investigate why Syria resisted American interference and military presence, and maintained its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, together forming *Mihwar al Muqawama* or Axis of Resistance. This chapter will investigate the politically acceptable options available at the decision-making level at the time for Bashar al-Asad, as well as why the change in leadership in June 2000 did not cause a break in Syria's foreign policy once Bashar al-Asad took office.

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<sup>220</sup> I was reminded by the famous saying of Hadidi during my interviews in Syria in 2010, when ordinary Syrians outside the business community and established professionals, complained about being "suffocated" by the security apparatus: "They are stifling us" was a repeated comment. Many were disenchanted by Bashar al Assad's liberal economic policies, which impoverished many provinces to the point of some expressing nostalgia for Hafez al Assad's day: "At least during the father's days the poor could eat."

The significance of this case is to highlight the longevity of the strategic Syrian alliance with Iran and Hezbollah that was not only maintained, but also reaffirmed during the Syrian regime existential crisis of 2003. The mere fact that Bashar al-Asad criticized the US occupation of Iraq and did not sever ties with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran after Colin Powell's visit to Damascus in 2003, highlights a interesting turning point in Syrian foreign policy that needs further evaluation. This chapter is concerned with Bashar al Assad's 2003 decision to reaffirm Syria's position with the resistance axis of Syria-Hezbollah-Iran. Why did Bashar al-Asad make that choice? What were the external and domestic determinants that led to his decision?

The first part, an introduction, will familiarize the reader with the domestic political environment surrounding Bashar al-Asad's ascendance to power in July 2000. Thereafter, this chapter will evaluate the neoclassical realism theory that prioritizes the external environment as the predominant explanatory factor, but also considers the role of domestic factors leading Syria to maintain its strategic alliances with Iran and Hezbollah. Poliheuristic theory will form a comprehensive approach to evaluating the politically acceptable options for the decision maker at that decisive moment in Syria's foreign policy history. Two alternative hypotheses will further illuminate probable explanations as to what caused Syria to maintain its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. One hypothesis is the liberal explanation, and the other is provided by structural realism.

## Introduction

On June 10, 2000, the uncontrollable sobbing by members of the Syrian People's Council, *Majlis al-Sha'b*, on the official Syrian TV channel, the day Hafez al-Asad died, made headlines around the world. The fervent reaction of the Syrian People's Council appeared again through televised exuberant cheers welcoming Bashar al-Asad as Syria's new president on July 17, 2000. The expedient rewriting of the Syrian constitution over night, to reduce the eligible age for a presidential candidate from 40 to 34, was unprecedented. The smooth transition was an earmark of consolidated rule in Syria, where the old guard, Hafez al-Asad's trusted inner circle, agreed to maintain the status quo of the internal order in Syria.

With the strong man dead, Syrian intellectuals and activists in exile felt they had a chance to reorganize and re-engage a population that was isolated from politics for decades.<sup>221</sup> Reviving civil society of Syria was a major concern for Syria's intellectuals in the latter half of 2000. A number of civil society initiatives were signed by a large number of intellectuals, educators, and activists who worked toward transforming Syrian familial loyalties and state patronage system into a state with a vibrant civil society and equal citizenship.<sup>222</sup> The internal social and political environment of Syria was ready for change in late 2000, and the authorities took note. Abdul Halim Khaddam and Faruq al-Shara, the trusted advisors to the late Hafez al-Asad and now Bashar, led the semi-official negotiations with the activists in

<sup>221</sup> One of the control measures deployed by authoritarian governments is to keep their populations depoliticized and unorganized, in addition to pacifying the population with key foodstuffs and gasoline. See Jack Goldstone, "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011, Weakness and Resilience in Middle East Autocracies," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011.

<sup>222</sup> Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, (London: Zed Books, 2003).

Syria. The activists' demands became the fodder for Bashar al-Asad's speech about reform, economic development, and the war on corruption on July 17, 2000<sup>223</sup> at Majlis al-Sha'b. But the optimism about possible political reform in Syria started to evaporate only six months after that speech.

On January 29, 2001, Information Minister Adnan Omran told journalists that *civil society* is an *American term*, and that the United States was aiding activists in developing countries by providing money and support through US embassies. The concerted effort by the Syrian government to discredit the activists and dissidents as traitors increased dramatically in the first half of 2001. The traditional political line that stressed the need for national unity in the face of Israel's aggression increased after Ariel Sharon won the Israeli elections in February 2001. The eruption of the second Intifada in Israel mobilized the Syrian internal political rhetoric of unity against Zionism and United States hegemony.

The information minister further elaborated that the demand for freedom is a fair demand, but at the same time, the Syrian Constitution guards against *blind freedom*, the type of freedom that undermines the unity of society. Precisely because, Omran adds, *blind freedom* is considered a threat to the country as a whole, and that was a red line that could not be crossed. The government campaign against the activists intensified. Bashar al-Asad gave an interview in *al Sharq al Awsat* on February 9, 2001, in which he stated that this "small group of intellectuals do not represent the majority, and that there are great differences between what this group is advocating and what the majority of Syrians want." Bashar al-Asad then refined

<sup>223</sup> Bashar al Assad, Speech, The General Authority of Television and Radio, 2000, Television.

his approach to possible reforms as being bound by two parameters; one was “horizontal, meaning the nation’s border, and one was vertical, meaning the security of the homeland—anything within those two parameters is possible.” (*Al Sharq al Awsat*, February 9, 2001. The crackdown on activists continued with the closing of forums, arrests, and trials. By mid-2002, many activists ended up in jail or in exile. Political change was not on the agenda for the Syrian political elite, that included Ba’thists, Sunni Merchants and Syria’s bureaucracy, in 2001. Stifling demands for political reform emboldened the old guard of the Syrian political elite. The traditional political elite in Syria continued to define political norms and preferences, and guided the political discourse within the well-established Ba’th-inspired political priorities. Starting out with a sincere effort to introduce political reform in Syria, Bashar al-Asad’s intentions were not a match for a well-established political hierarchy, which in return for insuring Bashar’s rule needed to maintain the dominance of the established order. The tip of the pyramid needed the base.

### **8.1 The Decision to Maintain the Axis of Resistance in 2003**

Despite the existential threat to the Syrian establishment in 2003, after the US invasion of Iraq, Bashar al-Asad held his ground and reaffirmed Syria’s strategic alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, in clear opposition to US policy in the region. 2003 became a testing ground for Syria’s foreign policy and alignment behavior: Would it diverge from the resistance axis and break from Syria’s foreign policy formulation that had been established in 1970? This chapter will try to explain what prompted

Syria to maintain its alliances with Iran and Hezbollah during the existential threat of regime change in 2003.

### 8.1.1 External Environment

The terrorist attacks of September 11 cast their shadow on the foreign policy orientation of states in the Middle East long after 2001.<sup>224</sup> The intense mobilization of American forces in the Middle East, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and Qatar served as a prelude to the American military intervention in Afghanistan and, later, in Iraq. George Bush's doctrine of preemptive attacks and, in particular, his "Axis of Evil" speech on January 29, 2002, established a firm understanding of the dichotomy between friendly states and evil states that posed a "danger to humanity."<sup>225</sup> Iran, Iraq, and North Korea made the first list.<sup>226</sup> Later, on May 6, 2002, then Undersecretary of State John Bolton expanded the list to include Libya, Syria, and Cuba as state sponsors of terrorism and states that were actively acquiring weapons of mass destruction.<sup>227</sup>

The international environment in 2002 put Syria on the defensive. Syria did not see the mobilization against Saddam Hussein and Iraq as a replica of the

<sup>224</sup> NSA, (nonclassified report, 2001), [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CTE01291](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CTE01291). Syria was named among the Middle Eastern states that sponsored terror. NSA, (nonclassified testimony, 2003), [http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CWM00595](http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CWM00595). Testimony stated that Syria was developing weapons of mass destruction and a missile development program.

<sup>225</sup> George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address (January 29, 2002)," *Miller Center University of Virginia*, 2013, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540>.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> John Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad* (New York: Threshold Editions-Simon & Schuster, 2007).



international environment of 1991. This time, the focus of Western powers, led by the United States, was not liberating a territory from the military grip of an expansionist Iraq. Rather, the US had a broader agenda with the objective of establishing a new order in the region that was directed against the states sponsors of terrorism in the Middle East.

Iraq endured a decade of economic sanctions that started with the implementation of UN resolutions 661 and 687 in 1990 and 1991 following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and defeat in the January 1991 Gulf War.<sup>228</sup> Later, UN resolution 706 and UN resolution 712 in 1991 launched the Oil for Food program in Iraq.<sup>229</sup> By 1999 and early 2000, Syria was one of the regional beneficiaries of cheap oil from Iraq, and a tacit rapprochement developed between Syria and an isolated Iraq in 1997 when both reopened their borders and lifted travel restrictions between their respective states. This rapprochement continued during the start of Bashar al-Asad's presidency. In 2001, both countries signed a free trade agreement. The Iraqi Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadan said that this free trade accord with Syria was a "step towards Arab unity and the establishment of an Arab common market." The trade agreement increased the volume of trade between the two countries from

<sup>228</sup> UN Security Council. *Resolution 661 (1990) Adopted by the Security Council at Its 2933rd Meeting, on August 6, 1990, S/RES/661 (1990)*. New York: UN Security Council, 1990, <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=3b00f16b24>. UN Security Council. *Resolution 687 Adopted by the Security Council at Its 2981st Meeting, on 3 April 1991, S/RES/687 (1991)*. New York: UN Security Council, 1991, <http://www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/documents/687.pdf>.

<sup>229</sup> UN Security Council. *Resolution 706 Adopted by the Security Council August 15, 1991*. New York: UN Security Council, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/706>. UN Security Council. *Resolution 712 Adopted by the Security Council on September 19, 1991*. New York: UN Security Council, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/596/48/IMG/NR059648.pdf?OpenElement>.

\$500 million in 2000 to an estimated \$1 billion in 2001.<sup>230</sup> The closer relations that were forged between Syria and Iraq between 1997 and 2002 were a tactical move by both countries to complicate US attempts to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Syria was not particularly protective of Saddam, but the notion of economically suffocating a population to revolt against an Arab regime was not a welcomed scenario for Damascus. Even more threatening to the Syrian establishment was the idea of forceful regime change by US, or NATO lead armies. The Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement in 2002 was worrisome for the US policy makers who feared a possible Iran-Iraq-Syria axis.<sup>231</sup>

At that time Lebanon witnessed positive developments for Syria and Hezbollah when Israel unilaterally decided to withdraw its forces from the south, handing Hezbollah and its allies a momentous victory in May 2000. The al-Aqsa Intifada erupted in September 2000 after the collapse of the Israeli-Arab peace negotiations, bringing the urgency of finding a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict to the forefront of the regional policy agenda yet again. Syria maintained close relations with both Hamas and the PLO, but it enjoyed special consultative relations with Hamas leader Khalid Mishal, who lived in the Dumar neighborhood of Damascus. The Syrian interest of having a say in Palestinian affairs transferred smoothly from Hafez al-Asad to Bashar al-Asad, when the later became president in 2000. Syria mediated closer relations between Iran and Hamas, and Hamas started receiving financial and military aid from Iran through Hezbollah. Syria's regional

<sup>230</sup> "Syria and Iraq to Boost Trade," *BBC News*, January 31, 2001, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/1146804.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1146804.stm).

<sup>231</sup> "Oil Melts Enmity between Syria and Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 2002, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0516/p06s02-wome.html/%28page%29/2>.

role was increasing in influence among states and non-state actors. A successful military regime change in Iraq was seen as disruptive and would jeopardize the established self-proclaimed *Syrian role* in the region.

By late 2002, Syria forcefully argued in its domestic media against military action against Iraq. It was clear by 2002 that the United States was seeking forceful regime change in Iraq through military means, with or without serious Iraqi cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Syrian parliament member and former security official Suleiman Haddad contended, "Syria is opposed to this strike because Iraq is a sisterly country and there is no justification for such an attack. Unfortunately, the United States, backed by Israel, has aborted all the peaceful efforts because they want to crush any Arab country, which possesses large resources and elements of power".<sup>232</sup>

As a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council in 2002 and 2003, Syria, the only Arab state, was in a position to indicate the fate of the Iraqi regime from the Arab perspective. The UNSC Resolution 1441<sup>233</sup> found Iraq in material breach of UNSC 687, that required the removal of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. UNSC Resolution 1441 gave Iraq a final opportunity to disarm, so Syria decided to vote to approve the resolution after receiving verbal assurances from American officials that the United States would not attack Iraq without first consulting with the Security Council. Syria perceived this resolution as a last-ditch

<sup>232</sup> Nadim Kawach, "Syria Expects US to Launch Attack on Iraq," *Gulf News*, October 14, 2002.

<sup>233</sup> UN Security Council. *Resolution 1441 (2002) Adopted by the Security Council at Its 4644<sup>th</sup> Meeting, on 8 November 2002. S/RES/1441 (2002)*. New York: UN Security Council, <http://www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/documents/1441.pdf>.

effort to prevent internationally sanctioned aggression against Iraq. This Syrian position at the Security Council was criticized by the Arab media.<sup>234</sup>

As the reality of a U.S. strike on Iraq loomed ever larger, Syria called an Arab summit that convened in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt, on March 1, 2003. Syria was on the record as opposing the attack on Iraq more than any other Arab state to the extent that Bashar al- Asad proposed a ban on US access to Arab territory for the purposes of launching or preparing for a strike on Iraq.<sup>235</sup> With the tacit understanding that Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan have already agreed to provide access to the United States to use their territory/airspace to launch an attack on Iraq. This show of solidarity with an Arab state during a publicized Arab summit allowed Syria to regain some of its pan-Arab, anti-US-hegemony standing in the region.

Syria maintained that a peaceful resolution to the Iraqi crisis could be reached through UNSC Resolution 1441 and that the weapons inspectors should be given a reasonable opportunity to complete their mission. Butheina Sha'ban, spokesperson for the Syrian foreign ministry, expressed Syria's position against the war on Iraq in unequivocal terms by stating, "The masks have come off, and we are confronted with the painful historical reality that this aggression on the people,

<sup>234</sup> "Rebuffing Syria's Assurances on UNSC Resolution on Iraq," *al Sharq al Awsat*, November 11, 2002, (FBIS-NES-1111).

<sup>235</sup> Janine Zacharia, "Low Option-Is Iraq the Next Lebanon?" *New Republic*, March 17, 2003.

land, skies, and wealth of Iraq would not have been possible if the Arab countries had barred their facilities to the invader”.<sup>236</sup>

The United States opted not to propose a resolution to the Security Council that would authorize the use of force against Iraq, fearing that such a resolution would not be adopted. On March 19, 2003, US President George W. Bush delivered a speech before the start of the invasion of Iraq.<sup>237</sup> The United States, the UK, and their “coalition of the willing” launched the war on March 20, 2003. Syria was quick to condemn the attack as “aggressive, illegal, and unjustified” through its Ba’th Party Command.<sup>238</sup> Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al Shara offered his predictions and hope that the United States would lose the war.<sup>239</sup> The implied demand for regional change, that was part of the US strategy in Iraq, threatened established regional power structures, especially in Syria, and US officials started to increasingly single out Syria in their speeches and press conferences.

The explicit accusations against Syria by the United States became more intense from March 2003 onward. Syria and its allies, Iran and Hezbollah, were clearly on Saddam’s side from the US perspective. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld accused Syria and Iran of aiding Iraq and interfering in the coalition’s war efforts.

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<sup>236</sup> Butheina Sha’ban, “Can Arabs Wash Their Hands of This Blood?” *Arab News*, March 23, 2003.

<sup>237</sup> “Full Text: George Bush’s Address on the Start of War,” *The Guardian*, March 19, 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/20/iraq.georgebush>.

<sup>238</sup> “Syrian Arab Ba’th Party Command Condemns US Illegal and Unjustified War on Iraq,” SANA (FBIS-NES-0322), March 22, 2003. “Syria: Bush’s Ultimatum to Iraq Conflicts with UN Resolution,” SANA (FBIS-NES-0318), March 18, 2003.

<sup>239</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “Syria Wants US to Lose War, Its Foreign Minister Declares,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2003.

Syria was also accused of harboring wanted Iraqi Ba’thists.<sup>240</sup> The pressure on Syria mounted further after Secretary of State Colin Powell’s visit to Syria in May 2003 in which he confronted Bashar al-Asad with ultimatums, among them that al-Asad needed to close offices of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and that Syria stop its support of terrorism and Iraqi insurgents and withdraw the roughly 20,000 Syrian troops from Lebanon. The United States placed additional pressures on Syria with the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA) that was approved by Congress and signed by President Bush in December 2003.<sup>241</sup>

There was a pivotal moment when Syria was faced with mounting pressure from the United States to side with the coalition efforts in March 2003. Yet Syria maintained its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah and affiliation with Hamas and other Palestinian groups, including the Palestinian Liberation Front. The United States grew increasingly opposed to the Syrian authority and enacted economic sanctions in May 2004.

US efforts to have Syria conform to US policies in the Middle East, combined with Syria’s principled stance against regime change in Iraq complicated Syria’s voting performance at the Security Council on three resolutions. On UNSC Resolution 1483 of May 2003, Syria’s vote was absent, but later confirmed by Syria’s representative as approving the resolution. Syria abstained in August on UNSC Resolution 1500, which welcomed the establishment of the Iraqi Governing Council

<sup>240</sup> David Sanger and Eric Schmitt, “Rumsfeld Cautious Iran and Syria of Aid to Iraq,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2003.

<sup>241</sup> Flynt Leverett, “Inheriting Syria: Bashar’s Trial by Fire,” Brookings Institute, 2005.

(IGC). In October 2003, Syria voted for UNSC Resolution 1511, which formally recognized the legitimacy of the US-led IGC and drafted the timetable for a scheduled transition to a democratic Iraqi government.

Siding against Iraq was out of the question strategically for Bashar al-Asad in 2003. The dynamic economic and political cooperation between Iraq, Syria, and Iran was significant between 2000 and 2003. The Syrian Chambers of Commerce had facilitated cooperation and trade agreements between Syria and Iraq since 1997. Most Syrian revenues had come from its oil deals with Iraq since 2000 after the reopening of the Kirkuk-Banyas pipeline. With cheap oil flowing from Iraq into Syria for domestic use, Syria was able to export its oil at market prices at significant profits. The Syrian internal order of clientelism and internal consolidation hinged on keeping Syrian businessmen as strong allies who supported the current political establishment in Syria. This, in turn, entailed maintaining the status quo in Iraq.<sup>242</sup> Revenues also enabled the Syrian government to embark on some modest economic reforms. Syrian revenues from trade with Iraq reached \$3 billion in 2002.<sup>243</sup>

US plans for regime change in Iraq disrupted Syrian economic and regional interests, and there was no realistic way of reconciling Syrian and American interests at this time, as had been the case in 1991 after Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. George W. Bush took a wider ideological stance of not accommodating "rogue regimes" like Syria, whereas his father, George Herbert Walker Bush, had a well-defined objective of liberating Kuwait, and thus was able to secure the

<sup>242</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: Defying the Hegemon," in *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences*, ed. R. Fawn and R. Hinnebusch (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006).

<sup>243</sup> Eyal Zisser, "Syria, the United States, and Iraq Two Years after the Downfall of Saddam Hussein," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9, no. 3 (2005).

cooperation of Syria despite US disapproval of the Syrian regime and Syria's regional conduct. All the United States could offer to Syria in 2003 was threats and condemnation, which, in turn, contributed to Syria seeing its interest and security within its status quo alliance with Hezbollah and Iran.

### **8.1.2 Domestic Considerations and Regime Security**

It was clear that the Syrian position regarding the US war against Iraq cast its shadow over Bashar al-Asad's efforts to consolidate his authority after he assumed power in 2000. The old guard, represented by Abdul Halim Khaddam and Faruq al-Shara', were not only against the war in Iraq but were also opposed to any vote that would legitimize the presence of US forces in Iraq. When the Regional Command discussed the Syrian vote at the Security Council on UNSC 1483 the night before the UNSC vote, both Khaddam and al-Shara' were against voting for the resolution. Al-Asad was absent from the meeting but had approved the vote for the resolution. On the morning of the vote, Faisal Mekdad, the Syrian ambassador to the UN at the time, received two conflicting messages, one stated that Syria opposed the resolution, and one stated that al-Asad supported the resolution. Seeking clarification, Mekdad missed the vote that day at the UN, which is reflected in UNSC records. Faisal Mekdad later registered Syria's vote as approving of Resolution 1483.<sup>244</sup> This incident was a clear sign of the fragility of the system supporting Bashar al-Asad's authority.

Internal stability was a high priority for Bashar al-Asad. To enhance his credibility as a "reformer," Bashar moved toward domestic reforms within the

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, August 2010, Syrian Foreign Ministry, Damascus, Syria.



context of the Damascus Spring of 2000. When gradual implementation of political freedoms in Syria seemed impractical by 2003, and given the popular distrust of US intentions in the region, the Syrian establishment could not risk further divergence from public consent, knowing that Syrian authorities have disappointed the public by not swiftly implementing promised reforms. The Syrian population was still hopeful that Bashar al-Asad intended to launch reforms given the right circumstances. However, to be seen siding with the United States in its invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not in Syria's political or economic interests, and would have quickly undermined any legitimacy garnered by the new Syrian president. According to a regional poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, 80 percent of Syrians were against the invasion and, among media personnel and the Syrian business community, the percentage was even higher at 90 percent.<sup>245</sup>

The Syrian government's denunciation of the US invasion in 2003 became the political vehicle to establish legitimacy and increase Bashar al-Asad's popularity both domestically and regionally. By 2009, he was voted the most popular Arab president in the region according to a major survey of public opinion in Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia that was conducted by Shilby, Telhami, and Zogby International and presented at the Brookings Institute. Al-Asad's position against the war on Iraq early on was a constant reference point for

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<sup>245</sup> Center for Strategic Studies, "Title," (survey, 2005), 80, <http://www.ju.edu.jo/Pages/CenterforStrategicStudies.aspx>.

the people participating in the surveys,<sup>246</sup> especially after the international disappointment in the rise of insurgency and the lack of progress in consolidating Iraq's internal stability between 2003 and 2009.

Rather than increasing the vulnerability of the Syrian establishment, opposing the US "aggression" toward Iraq in 2003 contributed to the popularity and perceived steadfastness of Bashar al-Asad against American intervention in the region because he, along with Iran, had been the only one to publically denounce the invasion in 2003. It was a clever "bait and switch" on the part of the Syrian authority so that, without granting any practical political reform domestically, Syria enjoyed an increased regional stature of steadfastness, a stance that increased the president's popularity at home as well.

The Syrian establishment was aware of the resentments that started to build among Syrian democracy activists, especially after prosecutions and prison time became part of the government response to the activists' calls for reform. The political opening of the Damascus Spring in 2000 did not live up to its potential of delivering tangible reforms in the political and economic lives of Syrians by 2003, at least not at the pace hoped for by Syrian activists.

The Syrian government actively substituted the vocabulary of political and economic reform in the Syrian political discourse in 2003 with the vernacular of Arab nationalism and Arab solidarity against US neo-imperialism and Western intervention in MENA. Furthermore, Bashar al-Asad and the Ba'th Party Regional Command accommodated and re-engaged the conservative Sunni communities in

<sup>246</sup> Mark Lynch, "Arab Public Opinion in 2009," *FP*, May 19, 2009, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/arab\\_public\\_opinion\\_in\\_2009](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/arab_public_opinion_in_2009).

Damascus, especially the followers of Syrian Mufti Ahmad Keftaru, Sheikh Mohammad Ramadan al- Butti, and Mohammad Habash, who became a member of the Syrian Parliament.

The Islamic-inspired vernacular of Syrian officials in 2003 and thereafter, with constant references to the interest of the Islamic Umma, generated loyalty among the Sunni communities in Syria. Another dynamic was underway as well. The strong Syrian-Iranian relations were further bolstered internally in Syria. A number of al-Khomeini educational and cultural centers sprung up in Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib, and al-Raqqa after 2000. The fear among some Syrians was that Iran would attempt to convert Sunnis to Shiism in Syria. Practically, however, the effort was directed to convert offshoots of Shia to the “Twelver” (Ithna Ashar) brand of Shiism of Iran. The analogy, which was most-repeated by the interviewees, was that “all the little branches of a river need to be guided to the main stream”, the main stream being Ithna Ashar Shiism.<sup>247</sup>

Economically, the flow of Iraqi refugees and, in particular, the wealthy Iraqi Ba’thists contributed to the Syrian economic recovery that started in 2004 by stimulating cross-border trading, the housing market, and investment in Syrian businesses.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Syria’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) doubled between 2004 and 2010 to \$60 billion.<sup>248</sup> The Syrian position opposing the American occupation of Iraq, and its effort to dismantle the

<sup>247</sup> Interviews and discussions with Damascus University Political Science professors at the Strategic Studies Center at Damascus University, December 2010.

<sup>248</sup> International Monetary Fund. *Syrian Arab Republic: 2007 Article IV Consultation–Staff Report; and Public Information Notice on the Executive Board Discussion*, Country Report No. 07/288, Washington DC: International Monetary Fund, August 15, 2007, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/cat/longres.aspx?sk=21272.0>.

Iraqi state, and disband the Ba'th Party provided a safe haven for Iraqi Ba'thists and the Iraqi business community that fled Iraq because of the insecurity and chaos that ensued after 2003.

### 8.1.3 The Decision to Challenge US Intervention

The decision to oppose US unilateral military action against Iraq in March 2003 proved that Syria was able and willing to take risks. Syria was explicitly categorized as opposing and disrupting the US policy of ridding the region of revisionist regimes, supporting democratization, and fighting terrorism and terrorist groups. While Syria maintained its opposition to invasion and regime change, it emphasized the importance of peace negotiations with Israel. Bashar al-Asad made a point of mentioning his intention to engage in bilateral peace negotiations with Israel in 2007, if a peaceful and equitable solution for Palestinians was on the table.<sup>249</sup> With this dual maneuver, Syria was able to satisfy its position of supporting Arab solidarity and opposing US intervention in the region, thereby satisfying its domestic constituency, while presenting itself regionally as non-belligerent and in pursuit of peaceful solutions to the most pressing political and security issue in the region—the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Syria prioritized maintaining Arab solidarity in its foreign policy against US aggression over adopting a tactical pragmatism of offered support of the US agenda. However, this Syrian position was not entirely voluntary. The United States did not need a green light from an Arab state at this point in time, especially from an Arab state that it explicitly categorized as a threat to peace and a supporter of terrorism.

<sup>249</sup> Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The Road to Damascus, Opportunity Knocks," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004.

The Bush administration used the coercive leverage generated by its military presence in Iraq in 2003 to encircle Syria and pressure it to submit to the US agenda of change in the region. This targeted pressure on Syria, further constrained the Syrian decision makers in their maneuver options. Reaffirming Syria's position in the resistance axis became less of a choice and more of a necessity, while Syria continued to hope for an American failure in Iraq. In an interview with Greek television channel ETR in November 2003, Bashar al-Asad responded to a question about his opinion regarding the US invasion of Iraq:

“We see it, as many other neighboring Arab states or Middle Eastern states now see it, the situation in Iraq is very bad on the social, political, economic, and humanitarian level, and even according to Iraqis themselves. The whole problem began with the occupation and with the collapse of the Iraqi state.”<sup>250</sup>

#### **8.1.4 Reliable Allies and Regional Turbulence**

What were the options available to Bashar al-Asad in 2003 before, during, and after the invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime? Bashar al -sad needed the support of the Regional Command and his close advisors from the various security branches—Ali Mamluk, Mohammad Nassif, Jamil al-Hassan, and Assef Shoukat—all of whom had considerable political and economic interests in both Lebanon and Iraq. Bashar al-Asad needed to showcase and prove his leadership credentials to the old guard. The Bush administration's demands of Syria

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<sup>250</sup> Greece Television ETR interview with President Bashar al Assad, November 14, 2003.

were precisely focused on severing Syria's economic, security, and political interests in both Lebanon and Iraq and weakening its ties to Iran. The politically acceptable options available to Syria's leadership when faced with Colin Powell's ultimatums in Damascus were few. One option that was out of the question, was to express tacit support for the American agenda, withdraw from Lebanon, close Hamas and Hezbollah offices, and cut ties with Hezbollah and Iran. Al-Asad would have faced internal regime collapse before the United States would have taken note of his cooperation.

While Hafez al-Asad had a consolidated power base in Syria, when confronted with the task of choosing the best course of action during the First Gulf War in 1990, his personal preference was to consult a few close advisors, of which his preferred advisor remained Abd al-Halim Khaddam. That was a decision-making preference resulting from a reliable power base that Hafez al-Asad, Bashar's father, took great lengths to stabilize over twenty years, namely between 1970 and 1990, when Syria participated in the First Gulf War. On the other hand, Bashar al-Asad sidelined Khaddam and relied on the heads of the security apparatuses; al Mukhabarat al Jauwia (airport Security Service); and Regional Command support, especially from Saeed Bkhaitan, the director of the National Security office at the Ba'th Party Regional Command from 2000–2005.<sup>251</sup> In other words, Bashar al-Asad

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<sup>251</sup> Interview with ex-Syrian diplomat who wishes to remain anonymous, December 2013. Ex-diplomat resides in Doha, Qatar.

had to satisfy the preference of wider politically relevant elites who were traditional Ba’thists and Pan-Arabists.<sup>252</sup>

Colin Powell’s May 2003 ultimatum was not a politically acceptable option for al- Asad and not a rational one in the context of Syrian national interests either. The Syrian decision-making circle, when faced with a radical ultimatum, responded with the only rational option available, and that was to reaffirm its tried and true alliance with Hezbollah and Iran and project a nonbelligerent policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict by proposing bilateral peace negotiations.

### **8.2 Regime Survival during the Regime Change in Iraq**

This particular case study is significant for the purposes of examining the validity of alternative predictions provided by the liberal theorists. From the liberal perspective, a nondemocratic state facing the threat of regime change by the military might of a super power such as the United States would prioritize the regime’s survival above all other considerations. The United States clearly stated that Syria was on the wrong side of history in 2003 and faced the threat of regime change if it did not take considerable steps to avoid the fate of Saddam Hussein. According to this logic, Syria would have had to agree to US demands in May 2003 to be assured that it would be spared military aggression. From the liberal perspective, that was the only course of action available for a nondemocratic state facing the threat of regime change. That option, of course, was still irrational because foreign

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<sup>252</sup> Volker Perthes, *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change*, (London: Lynne Rienner, 2004). Volker Perthes defines *Political Relevant Elite* (PRE) as “all those who yield political influence and power in that they take strategic decisions or participate at decision making at the national level, contribute to defining political norms and values (including national interests) and directly influence political discourse on strategic issues,” 5.

policy, in this sense, was solely utilized for regime survival and not for ensuring strategically attainable objectives in the immediate environment. The liberal prediction did not materialize in this case. Syrian foreign policy took the strategic option of re-affirming its established alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, protecting its security interests in Lebanon and Iraq, opposing the occupation of Iraq, and receiving and supporting Iraqi Ba'athists and Iraqi military personnel in Syria.<sup>253</sup>

### 8.3 Bandwagoning during the 2003 Iraq War

The existential crisis in 2003 faced by the Syrian establishment was significant and unparalleled.<sup>254</sup> If there were an opportune time for Syria to bandwagon and exploit the international polarization of supporting or opposing the US, as stated by President George W. Bush, it would have been the crisis of 2003. Bandwagoning would have been the predicted behavior from the structural realist perspective for a weak state in Syria's position facing increasing external security threats with the military presence of the United States in Iraq. Yet Syria entrenched its regional position with that of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, while rejecting US military intervention in the region and decrying US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 as an alleged breach of international law.

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<sup>253</sup> Interviews with Iraqi refugees in Damascus, Syria, who were ex-employees at the educational ministry in Iraq. They wished to remain anonymous. August 2010.

<sup>254</sup> Interview with Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad and the president of the Virtual University in Damascus, Riyadh al Dawoodi, who was a close advisor to Bashar al-Asad between 2003 and 2010.



## Chapter Nine

### Conclusion

While I was writing the concluding chapter of this project in March 2014, the Syrian government had achieved military advancements in key rebel strongholds across the Lebanese Syrian border and on the outskirts of Aleppo in the north. Thus far, Syria has been able to withstand the onslaught of Western international economic and diplomatic pressure that supported the armed fighters, with the help of regional alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, and the support of Russia and China.

Syria sees itself playing a vital role in the Middle East in the future, and it is working on popularizing the priority of fighting terrorism in MENA. Meanwhile, the Syrian government continues to paint the armed insurgency in Syria as terror groups comprised of foreign fighters and al-Qaeda affiliates. The international community recently recognizing the threat posed by al-Nusra Front and Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), fighting terrorism is becoming a priority for not only Arab and Middle Eastern States., but also for the US and Europe in 2014. Furthermore, Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia have criminalized the Muslim Brotherhood organization, which is accused of being the main agitator in the Syrian crisis. What remains to be seen is if Syria can militarily conquer the remaining strongholds of the armed opposition, and re-socialize its role in the region with its current establishment following the June 2014 elections.

What is of particular interest is that Syria's alliances have withstood the test of time and have been resilient even during what could be considered an existential crisis, i.e. the Arab uprisings of 2011 and after. This study sheds light on what determined these alliance choices, what theoretical models are best equipped to capture, conceptually and empirically, the variety of external and internal causal variables.

A careful historical analysis and process tracing of events, cross-examined by National Security Archive, memoirs, and interviews revealed that external factors had a predominant role in determining the alliance choices available to the Syrian authority. Domestic factors and the resistance principle in Syrian foreign policy provided the political constraints facing the Syrian decision-makers, which in turn refined those options to one that was politically acceptable to them. The five examined cases include the following:

- The Syrian–Egyptian Alliance leading up to the 1973 war
- The Syrian–Iranian Alliance, 1979–2010
- Syria joining the First Gulf War Coalition in 1990
- The Syrian Alliance with Hezbollah, 1990–2010
- The Syrian regime security crisis of 2003

One can infer the integral causal influence that external factors had on alliance options in Syria between 1970 and 2010. The dynamic that transpired was that Hafez al- Asad would sense the change in the regional security environment and position Syria as part of an alliance, whether with Egypt in 1971 or with Iran in 1979, while consolidating his domestic power position. This trend set the stage for

what scholars deemed the Syrian phenomenon: the phenomenon of a weak state ,in matters of resources and material capability compared to Israel and the Gulf states, but one that maintained a considerable regional role and influence.

What sets neoclassical realism apart from structural realism and liberal theory is its ability to bridge the gap between structural and state-level influences on foreign policy behavior. The caveat that gives neoclassical realism its predictive capability is the centrality of a driving principle or belief held by the decision makers, which is key to sorting out possible alignment choices. In the Syrian case, it is the principle of resisting American and western hegemonic interference in the region that differentiates alignment options that are politically acceptable from the ones that are not. In this project, I suggest that this trend will appear in the foreign policy of more Middle Eastern states after the second wave of political independence that began during the Arab uprisings in 2011. Arab leaders are increasingly assertive and follow a pragmatic foreign policy that derives legitimacy from appearing less than compliant with American interests in MENA. Even long standing allies of the United States, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia increased their strategic talks with both Russia and China in 2013 and 2014. Currently Iran-Iraq-Syria and Hezbollah are the avant-garde of the radical form of resisting American and western hegemonic intervention in the region.

*Findings:*

In the five cases examined in this study, structural realism and liberal theory fail to predict Syria's alignment behavior. In all five cases, structural realism would have predicted bandwagoning behavior in reaction to increased security threats in

the external environment, yet bandwagoning did not occur. Liberal theory would have predicted an alignment behavior guided by regime survival. As a counterfactual experiment, the project examined the would-be alliance in that case. Liberal theory also failed in predicting the alliance choice in the five examined cases. Regime security is the key to constructing a falsification test in the application of neoclassical realism to Syrian alignment behavior between 1970 and 2010. Regime security drives power consolidation, a central tenant of domestic policy during Hafez a-l Asad and Bashar al-Asad rule. As a domestic factor, it contributed to alignment shifts in Syrian foreign policy since 1970. However, this factor did not prompt an alignment shift in 2003. A possible explanation is that the Syrian authority felt cornered with no other option but to strengthen the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis. The same tactic played itself out in the existential crisis that began in 2011.

Regime security might have evolved since 2011 to become synonymous with the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis. Hence, the role of regime security in the Syrian case might have evolved during the current crisis to become interlinked with axis security, which facilitates a strategic codependency between Iranian regime security, Hezbollah regime security, and Syria's regime security. Al-Maliki seems to situate Iraq as part of this axis as of recent, he has also adopted the priority of fighting terrorism in Iraq and coordinating with the Syrian government to fight ISIS, and armed rebels (that are supported by the west in Syria). One fact is self-evident at this point: Syria's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah is a strategic alliance based on

mutual interests and shared strategic principles of resisting Western interference in MENA region.

This study has attempted to investigate the determinants of alliance behavior of an authoritarian Middle Eastern state. The value lies in the fact that Middle Eastern crises are predominantly intra-state, i.e. within-state social and political unrest, and are fueled by tension between regional alliances. This tension ripples further out to increased tension between powerful regional states, such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia and to international great powers such as the US, Russia and China. This within-state crisis is not confined to the Syrian case, but is also applicable to internal tensions in Egypt, in which authorities accuse Qatar of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and Iraq in which al-Maliki accuses Saudi Arabia of supporting terrorist groups and al-Qaeda operations in Iraq.

The pervasiveness of tension between regional alliances is a constant characteristic of the Middle East that has survived the Cold War era. We have seen evidence of this play out during the current Syrian crisis. On the one hand, Iran and Hezbollah are supporting the Syrian government regionally, along with the support of Russia and China. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, on the other hand, are supporting the Syrian armed opposition regionally, along with support from the United States and Europe. Regional tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia have contributed and manifested tensions between the United States and Russia over the last three years. Understanding alliance formation in the Middle East as motivated by the external security environment is crucial, though one must take into consideration domestic consolidation of power and the guiding belief of the main decision-makers.

Although culture, identity, and historical memory play vital roles in shaping political preferences, this study assumes that prevailing political discourse, media outlets, and decision-maker preferences do reflect the cumulative effects of historical memory, culture, and identity. Future research might investigate these factors in particular and link them to decision makers' preferences during a crisis. Future research might also extend the application of neoclassical realism and test its validity through case studies of other Middle Eastern states. One study that would be particularly valuable is to investigate the contrast of what determines foreign policy behavior and alliance choices of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Future research might also contrast foreign policy behavior and alliance formation in the Middle East during the past seventy years. The research could be forward leaning and investigate the shift in foreign policy-making of a state that experienced regime change after 2011. Egypt's foreign policy under the guidance of General Abd al-Fattah al-Sissi experienced a significant shift in 2013 and 2014. Closer ties with Russia and China were developed, as was an attitude of mistrust of the perceived American agenda in Egypt. This trend should not be understood as anti-American but rather as symbolic of a desire for independence in foreign policy-making that Syria has exercised since 1970. The same shift can be discerned in Iraq's and Oman's foreign policy.

This study focused on Syria's regional alignment between 1970 and 2010. I propose that understanding foreign policies, and more importantly alignment behavior, of non-democratic Middle Eastern states is crucial to our understanding of the eruption, longevity and outcome of crisis in the Middle East. The current crisis in

Syria, chronic instability in Iraq, and unrest in Egypt cannot be understood without accounting for tensions between regional powers and their respective alignments. Scholars need to understand non-democratic states foreign policies outside regime type confines and in absence of weak/strong categorization. I hope that this study did shed some light on the driving factors behind alignment choices made by a non-democratic Middle Eastern state. Weak as well as stronger non-democratic states are able to project influence in their immediate environment. As this study demonstrated, weak non-democratic states are capable of compounding such influence once part of a regional axis.

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