

London School of Economics and Political Science

**Understanding and Explaining US-Syrian Relations: Conflict and Cooperation, and the Role of Ideology**

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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a study of US-Syrian relations, and the legacy of mistrust between the two states. While there has been a recent growth in the study of Syria's domestic and regional politics, its foreign policy in a global systemic context remains understudied within mainstream International Relations (IR), Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), and even Middle Eastern studies, despite Syria's geo-political centrality in the region. The primary purpose of the thesis is to analyse and understand the driving factors in US-Syrian relations, both the continuities – distinctive in the context of the region's dynamic political landscape – and the rarer instances of discontinuity. By analysing the causes and constituents of US-Syrian relations, the thesis will also challenge a purely realist and power-political explanation that has dominated the discourse on Middle Eastern foreign policy; without discarding the value of alternative conceptual explanations, the thesis will argue that Syria's position towards the US has been significantly (though not exclusively) influenced by a politically embedded set of ideas and principles that have evolved from an anti-colonial Arab nationalist ideology.

Though recent constructivist debates have (rightly) brought the role of identity and social structure back to the fore, ideological or value-laden motives are still at times treated dismissively as an instrument of power politics (particularly in relation to Middle Eastern regimes) or, conversely, as a sign of regime irrationality. The apparent methodological impasse in credibly connecting ideational motives with foreign policy implementation and the perceived incompatibility between ideas and pragmatic decision-making have prevented a deeper and more sophisticated exploration of ideological influences within IR.

Thus the second aim of the thesis is to redress this imbalance by introducing a methodological framework of analysis for studying ideology in foreign policy-making; this will be operationalised by historically charting the development and influence of ideas on Syria's position towards the US, drawing upon original archival material that has hitherto not been utilised in existing literature on this subject. I argue that in Syria's case state interests and security concerns are not dichotomous to ideational values; rather the two are coterminous goals in Syrian foreign policy. In doing so the thesis employs historical analysis and FPA methods to assess the significance of the following factors in influencing Syria's ideology, and thereby its relations with the US: Syria's colonised past and contemporary US interventionism in the region; the policies and ideology of Israel; and finally the structure of the Syrian regime, and its connection to public opinion.

## Contents

List of Acronyms.....	6
Acknowledgements.....	7
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2. Operationalising Ideology and Defining Syrian Arab Nationalism.....</b>	<b>43</b>
2.1 The ‘Problem’ of Ideology.....	45
2.2 Core and Peripheral Principles.....	61
2.3 Affiliated Ideologies: Arab nationalism and Socialism.....	73
2.4 Rival Ideologies: Arab Nationalism and Islamism.....	81
2.5 Conclusion.....	88
<b>3. The Emergence of US-Syrian Relations: From Truman to Kennedy.....</b>	<b>90</b>
3.1 The early Syrian State and US Isolationism.....	92
3.2 The Rising US Role and Arab Disappointment.....	97
3.3 Truman’s Policies and Syrian Scepticism.....	106
3.4 US-Syrian Relations under Eisenhower.....	119
3.5 Syria and the US after the UAR: from ally to enemy.....	125
3.6 Conclusion.....	131
<b>4. Syria’s Isolation and the Birth of the US-Israeli Special Relationship.....</b>	<b>134</b>
4.1 Hafez Asad’s Ascendancy in the Ba’th party.....	136
4.2 The 1967 Arab-Israeli War.....	141
4.3 Aftermath of the War.....	147
4.4 Syria’s Marginalisation and the Advent of a New Regime.....	161
4.5 Asad’s Pragmatism and the Impact on US-Syrian Relations.....	167
4.6 Conclusion.....	176
<b>5. US-Syrian Engagement: Disengagement Talks 1973 – 75.....</b>	<b>178</b>
5.1 The US and Syria: Perceptions, Goals and Strategies.....	180
5.2 Terms of Syrian-Israeli Disengagement and US-Syrian Rapprochement.....	190
5.3 Egypt ‘Defects’.....	200
5.4 Conclusion.....	214

<b>6. US-Syrian Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Era</b> .....	218
6.1 Syria’s Participation in the Gulf War and Implications for Ideology.....	219
6.2 The Launch of the Madrid Talks – Breakthrough in the Middle East.....	228
6.3 Transition from Bush to Clinton.....	234
6.4 Implications for US-Syrian relations.....	241
6.5 Explaining the Failure of the Madrid Process.....	246
6.6 Conclusion.....	265
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	268
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	285

## List of Acronyms

<b>AIPAC</b>	<b>American Israeli Public Affairs Committee</b>
<b>ARAMCO</b>	<b>Arabian American Oil Company</b>
<b>CENTO</b>	<b>Central Treaty Organisation</b>
<b>CIA</b>	<b>Central Intelligence Agency</b>
<b>COS</b>	<b>Chief of Staff</b>
<b>DMZ</b>	<b>Demilitarised Zone</b>
<b>ERP</b>	<b>European Reconstruction Programme</b>
<b>FO</b>	<b>Foreign Office (British Government)</b>
<b>FPA</b>	<b>Foreign Policy Analysis</b>
<b>FRUS</b>	<b>Foreign Relations of the United States</b>
<b>GCC</b>	<b>Gulf Cooperation Council</b>
<b>ICRC</b>	<b>International Committee of the Red Cross</b>
<b>IDF</b>	<b>Israeli Defence Force</b>
<b>IMF</b>	<b>International Monetary Fund</b>
<b>IR</b>	<b>International Relations</b>
<b>MEC</b>	<b>Middle East Command</b>
<b>NA</b>	<b>National Archives</b>
<b>NATO</b>	<b>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation</b>
<b>NIE</b>	<b>National Intelligence Estimate</b>
<b>NSC</b>	<b>National Security Council</b>
<b>OPEC</b>	<b>Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries</b>
<b>PLO</b>	<b>Palestinian Liberation Organisation</b>
<b>POW</b>	<b>Prisoner of War</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>State Department (United States Government)</b>
<b>TAPLINE</b>	<b>Trans Arabian Pipeline Company</b>
<b>TWA</b>	<b>Transworld Airlines (American)</b>
<b>UAR</b>	<b>United Arab Republic</b>
<b>UN</b>	<b>United Nations</b>
<b>UNDOF</b>	<b>United Nations Disengagement Observer Force</b>
<b>UNSC</b>	<b>United Nations Security Council</b>
<b>US</b>	<b>United States of America</b>
<b>USINT</b>	<b>United States Intelligence</b>
<b>USSR</b>	<b>Union of Soviet Socialist Republics</b>

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Finally, as ever, *alhamdulillah, wa al-shukrulillah.*



## Chapter 1 Introduction

Bashar Asad and George W. Bush began their presidencies only six months apart in July 2000 and January 2001 respectively. In the time President Bush was in office the relations between the two states deteriorated, seemingly beyond repair, with recriminations and accusations from both sides. Both held that the other party was chiefly responsible for the souring of relations. Relations between the two states in this period were variously described as ‘estranged’, ‘hostile’, ‘tense’, ‘dire’, ‘very strained’, and characterised by ‘outright mutual hostility’ and ‘mistrust’.<sup>1</sup>

The poor relations did not start then however and answers to how and why the relationship has been so cold cannot be traced back solely to the presidencies of George W. Bush and Bashar Asad. An analysis of the history of US-Syrian relations is necessary to provide context to recent tensions, which shows that while the US and Syria were not always in opposition to each other, the antipathy between the two states goes back a long way – at the best of times their relations were difficult and cautious, at worst they were openly hostile.

To begin with, no significant historical ties existed between the US and Syria prior to the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> After the First World War and the break-up of the Ottoman Empire the British and the French were the dominant external powers in the region. Under French colonial rule, Syrian anger and suspicion towards European, and more generally any form of western intervention, was channelled into a mass movement for independence and Arab unity.<sup>3</sup> During this period, the US remained aloof from the region and the colonial exploits of the British and the French. They generally supported Arab autonomy – indeed they applauded

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<sup>1</sup> See: United States Congressional Report 2008; “U.S.-Syria: Who’s converting whom?”, *Middle East Strategy at Harvard*, 25 April

2008:[http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/04/us\\_syria\\_whos\\_converting\\_whom/](http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/04/us_syria_whos_converting_whom/); “Iraq a catalyst for US-Syria rapprochement?” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 4 April 2010:

<http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/n.php?n=iraq-a-catalyst-for-us-syria-rapprochement-2010-04-04>;

“Inside Story”, *Al-Jazeera English*, 22 February 2009:

<http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/insidestory/2009/02/200922214452166695.html>; “US-Syria Relations Still Mired in Mistrust”, *BBC News*, 18 March 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7949480.stm>;

“Engaging Syria? U.S. Constraints and Opportunities”, International Crisis Group Report on US-Syrian Relations, February 2009: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/syria/083-engaging-syria-us-constraints-and-opportunities.aspx>; Council on Foreign Relations, report 18 February 2005: <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east/middle-east-us-syrian-relations/p7852>.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed since its formation, the US had very limited involvement in the Middle East as a whole. It was however brought abruptly out of its isolation from the region after the First World War, when it was required to participate in the post-war reconfiguration of the Middle East. A fuller historical account is provided in Chapter Three.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986 : Politics and Society* (Unwin Hyman, 1988), 23-25; Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (OUP 1965).

Syria's independence from the French in 1946 – and as a result, they were viewed in a more positive light by many Arabs.

However, this changed after the onset of the Cold War, when the US took on a far greater political interest in the region, largely framing its Middle East policies around its own strategic and economic interests and interpreting the region's politics through the lens of its own ideological battle with the USSR.<sup>4</sup> With increased instances of US intervention (the 1951 Middle East Command; the attempted coup against Iran's Mosadeq in 1953; initial support for British presence in the Suez Canal and the 'Omega' policy to discredit Nasser), much of the earlier goodwill that the Syrians may have felt towards the US was eroded. The Syrian-American crisis in 1957, in which the US planned (but failed) to organise a coup against the weak and pro-Soviet Syrian government, established Syria's lasting perceptions of the US as 'second-generation imperialists'.

The Arab-Israeli War in 1967 marked a turning-point in Syria's regional role and importance to the US. Having lost the Golan Heights to Israel, the Syrians became firmly entrenched within the Arab-Israeli conflict and would have a crucial role to play in the region, with the choice of either facilitating or 'obstructing' US mediation and intervention in the conflict. In the 1973 war against Israel, Egypt and Syria hoped to retrieve their respective territories and increase their bargaining powers in negotiations. After separate negotiations with Israel, and with US help, Egypt succeeded in its aim; Syria, in contrast, did not. Egypt's 'defection' and the US' open acceptance of Israel's post-1967 war borders shifted Syria's position towards the US from one of cautious opposition to open provocation and hostility.

Thus Syria went on to be the first state to openly support and sponsor radical guerrilla factions in Lebanon (even before the formation of Hizbullah); it was the first state to acknowledge the new Islamist regime in Tehran in 1979, and was the only Arab state to openly support the militants in the Iranian hostage crisis. In turn, the US placed Syria on its list of 'state sponsors of terrorism' in 1979 and terminated financial aid and trading with Syria.

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<sup>4</sup> See Fawaz Gerges, *The superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955-1967* (Westview Press, 1994); David Lesch, *The Middle East and the United States: A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Westview Press, 2003); Alan Taylor, *The superpowers and the Middle East* (Syracuse University Press, 1991).

From this, Syria was able to forge a new role for itself in the region, as an opponent of US policies and obstructing Israeli interests where possible without risking its own survival. Syria's support for Iran during the Iran-Iraq war between 1980-88 (in which the US was supporting and arming Iraq), Syria's funding and supplying of arms to Hizbullah and Hamas against Israel, its disillusionment with the Madrid peace talks by 1996, and finally its opposition to the US 'War on Terror' and invasion of Iraq in 2003, are key examples of Syria's consistent opposition towards the US for more than forty years. Under the Bush administration, the US reciprocated Syria's policy by insisting on its exclusion from regional diplomacy, renewing the sanctions it had already placed on Syria, bracketing it among other 'rogue states', regularly accusing the Syrians of sponsoring terrorism, and singling out the regime for censure in its drive for democratisation in the Middle East.

### **Key Questions, Hypothesis and Contribution**

Thus from this brief historical outline it is clear that the US and Syria have had a long history of mutual hostility.<sup>5</sup> From this foundation we can set up the key *problématique* which forms the crux of this thesis. This can be further divided into primary research questions, which frame the overall objective and direction of the thesis, and secondary questions, which will help to substantiate the core arguments.

Firstly, despite the volatility and changing political landscape of the Middle East region, Syria stands out as one of the states with a relatively consistent foreign policy agenda, particularly in terms of its opposition towards American policy in the region. It predates Iranian enmity towards the US by several decades, and has outlived the previously antagonistic positions of Egypt, Libya and Iraq. While events and catalysts of dramatic change in the region routinely attract scholarly attention, the importance of continuities in patterns of relations should not be overlooked. Thus the key question to ask is: why has Syria *regularly* opposed the US? A comprehensive investigation of this question forms the

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<sup>5</sup> When using the term hostility here, it is not to be understood as armed conflict – in part the possibility of regular military warfare is negated by the asymmetries of military power between the two states. However, both Syria and the US can be described as having been engaged in an enduring conflict of interests, policies, tactics, goals and ideas. I argue that their diplomatic and political clashes, frequently exacerbated by the withdrawal of ambassadorial representation on both sides, can be categorised as a form of hostility when one understands that peace, or peaceful relations, denotes more than just the absence of inter-state military combat. The latter is an archetypal realist conceptualisation of peace that places analytical emphasis on military engagement. However, a broader and more complex understanding of both conflict and peace facilitates a reading of US-Syrian relations as hostile, antagonistic and certainly not peaceful. See Johan Galtung's seminal work 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6.3, (1969) which argues that structural violence can still prevail even in the absence of war; and Kristine Höglund and Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs 'Beyond the absence of war: the diversity of peace in post-settlement societies', *Review of International Studies*, 36, pp. 367-390 (2010). The literature relates to internal state politics, but the concept can be extended to the nature of inter-state relations.

primary goal of this thesis. A series of connected, *secondary*, questions follow on from this problématique:

1. To what extent is Syria, as argued by the US, an obstructionist force in the region – a ‘spoiler’ in any Middle East peace process and barrier to improved Arab-Israeli relations? And what does Syria gain from such a policy, particularly if - as is often posited by academics - conciliation and cooperation remains the likeliest route towards the recovery of its territory from Israel?<sup>6</sup>
2. Secondly, and crucially, why has Syria not (yet) followed the peaceful route taken by Egypt, its more powerful, fellow Arab state, with whom Syria supposedly shares greater ties in identity and history than it does with Iran? Certainly, there are striking similarities between Hafez Asad’s Ba’thist Syria and Nasserite Egypt, and their respective relations with the US, which warrants such a query. Both shared similar ideological and political positions vis-à-vis the US, and both were compelled to engage more closely with the US after losing territory to Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Yet by 1979, their paths dramatically diverged: whereas Egypt was able to forge a long-term alliance with the US after signing a peace treaty with Israel, Syria’s relations with the US continued to deteriorate. Why Syria’s relationship with the US has followed such a different trajectory from that of Egypt remains a question that has been answered only superficially within the existing literature.
3. Thirdly, to what extent is Syria’s opposition to the US framed by its alliance with Iran? A question that is regularly posed in policy circles is: what can be done, or what would it take, to coax Syria away from Iran’s perceived sphere of influence? Indeed is it even accurate to view Syria’s relations with Iran in this paternalistic light?
4. Finally, for all the above questions, just how important is Syria to the stability of the region? Is Syria effectively a bystander in the region’s affairs in relation to the aforementioned powers Egypt and Iran, both of whom have hegemonic claims to the region? Given Syria’s deficit in power – politically, economically, even in terms of

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiraven Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran : Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (Routledge, 1997)., 23.

the size of its population – does continued US-Syrian antipathy even matter or have any significant implications for the politics of the region?

These are all important points of enquiry, which this study will seek to address. But the framing of a question often depends on which side one stands and the assumptions one chooses to accept as the premise of those questions. In the literature, when seeking to understand the mutual hostility, the burden of scrutiny has tended to fall upon Syria rather than the US; this is in itself indicative of the prevailing assumptions about the two states. From the above angle of questioning, Syria is cross-examined from an external perspective, while the US carries the mantle of neutrality merely responding to Syria's self-constructed opposition. However, it is possible, and indeed important, to also pose the questions from the opposite angle and flip the scrutiny onto the US and its policies, analysing how it has shaped and affected Syria's position.

Thus the key lines of enquiry from this alternative perspective are the following: the *primary* question to start with regarding the US' role in its relations with Syria is to ask how the Americans have contributed to on-going hostility between the two states. Beyond this core question, four *secondary* questions can be extracted:

1. Firstly, the US for its part has had a consistently unsympathetic view of Syria and its role in the region, stemming from a deep suspicion of its ideological roots, and particularly its alliance with the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 60s. To what extent did the US allow its global concerns and its rivalry with the Soviet Union to disproportionately colour its view of Syria? Indeed, has the US held fixed perceptions about Syria without sufficient intelligence, and is it possible that it has, on key occasions, presupposed Syrian intransigence and hostility despite Syrian efforts to the contrary?
2. Secondly, what have been American expectations and demands of the Arab parties in the various regional peace processes, and what were the strategic judgments and interests behind them? Following on from this question it is important to ask how realistic or reasonable those demands have been in light of Arab interests and aspirations.

3. Thirdly, and crucially, how far has the US' close relationship with Israel hindered its role as a peace-broker in the region, and to what extent has that defined Syria's perceptions of and attitude towards the US?
4. And finally, the US championed Egypt during the Sadat and Mubarak regimes as a model for other states in the region to follow, and afforded it a great deal of power as a representative of the region and chief mediator between Israelis and Arabs. But in focusing so narrowly on the Egyptian government, has the US excluded voices of opposition such as the Syrians', and thereby undermining the comprehensiveness of any potential peace plan that would have to include such dissenters? Indeed, to what extent have US moves to isolate Syria from the regional and international system set the mould for Syrian obstructionism in the Middle East, perpetuating US-Syrian antipathy?

Returning, then, to the two primary questions of the thesis – why has Syria so regularly opposed the US, and in what ways has the US contributed to the on-going hostility between the two states? – this thesis will make the case that Syria's long-term opposition to the US, its foreign policies and presence in the region, is significantly influenced by ideological principles and not purely based on territorial or regime interests. In that sense this thesis highlights the importance of ideational factors in foreign policy. It will demonstrate how these values are structured, informed and sustained by historical experience, society, and an (adaptable) ideological vision that takes from, and feeds into, the beliefs and strategic options of both regime *and* society. Moreover, the thesis will argue that the US has played a major role in fostering the hostility with Syria through a policy of marginalisation and a pursuit of its own strategic interests above the issues concerning the region. (Mis)perceptions on both sides about each other have fuelled the antagonism and consolidated long-standing beliefs, which in turn sustain ideological positions held by both the Syrians and the Americans. While the thesis focuses mainly on the role of *Syrian* ideology and how it relates to the US, American ideology undoubtedly plays a role as well here.

In addressing the above questions and arguments, how does this thesis contribute to the current scholarship on Syrian and American foreign policy? Firstly it should be noted that the continuity in mutual hostility has not gone unnoticed in the existing literature – this part of the argument is therefore not a new claim. Scholars of Syria in particular have

highlighted its consistent foreign policy as one of the notable characteristics of the modern regime, particularly when compared to the fluctuating policies of its neighbours and the dynamism of the region in general.<sup>7</sup> However, much of the scholarship on Syria focuses on regime structure and domestic politics to explain this phenomenon, without placing it within sufficient global and regional contextualisation. Moreover, while there is plenty of literature that looks separately at US and Syrian foreign policies in the region respectively, there are relatively very few that examine in depth the bilateral relations between the two states. Only two studies have been carried out on this subject to date: David Lesch's *Syria and the United States: Eisenhower's Cold War in the Middle East*, (1992), an in-depth account of US-Syrian relations in the 1950s; and Robert Rabil's *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East*, (2006), bringing the story up to more recent times. The first is an excellent historical account drawing upon key primary documents, but it takes us no further than 1957 when US-Syrian relations were just beginning to take shape. The second is an informative but ultimately less rigorous analysis relying on secondary sources, and too bound up in regional dynamics to adequately distinguish between regional issues and US-Syrian bilateral relations – a difficult task, but one which this study seeks to accomplish.<sup>8</sup>

The relative dearth of literature on US-Syrian relations, when compared to US-Egyptian, -Iranian or -Saudi relations, reflects the US' own position towards Syria over recent years which has typically been ambivalent and fairly dismissive – prevailing views in the policy world regarding what issues are of high and low salience, tend to infiltrate and be reflected in academic output as well. Thus this study hopes to fill this gap in the literature on US-Syrian relations, but also to contribute to wider debates on Middle East politics and US policy in the region. Moreover, in analysing the importance of ideational factors in US-Syrian relations this thesis also seeks to challenge the dominant narrative on the subject (which will be elucidated in more depth shortly), as well as reflect both the American *and* Syrian sides of the debate (as opposed to a US-centric account). It aims to challenge the current discourse on US foreign policy towards Syria and the accepted notions of Syrian accountability for hostile relations, and in doing so the thesis also aims to offer a fresh conceptual framework for studying the subject. Through this project I hope to situate the role and function of ideas more clearly and accurately within the study of Middle East

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (Routledge, 2002), p. 1; Rick Fawn, Raymond Hinnebusch, *The Iraq war: Causes and Consequences* (Lynne Rienner 2006), 138-139; Robert Rabil, *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Praeger Security International, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> There remain a few solid non-academic works on US-Syrian relations, including Flynt Leverett's *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

politics in particular, and foreign policy analysis more generally; the following sections will discuss the way this will be done in more detail.

### **Theory: Realism and the Middle East**

In seeking to answer the key questions outlined and to substantiate the arguments posed above, there are two obvious and distinct methodological options. The first is to adopt a straightforward historical approach. The second approach is a predominantly theoretical one, in which claims by various paradigms about the nature of a system, state, society or individuals are employed to identify correlating patterns in the empirical case being studied. In this way, general rules are used to explain the particular, and often secondary (rather than primary) historical material tends to be deployed to affirm the validity and explanatory capacity of those theories. A third option is to combine the two approaches, more of which will be said later on. But first, we will look at some of the important *theoretical* approaches that have been used to explain events, policies and patterns of relations in the Middle East as a whole.

There have been a few key developments over the past fifty years when it comes to offering explanations for the region's politics. Previously dominating the field was the culturally deterministic route, stemming from orientalist and anthropological perspectives and generating an exceptionalist view of the region.<sup>9</sup> These studies focused on culture, religion, ideologies, emotion and the 'Arab mindset' as the drivers behind Middle Eastern foreign policy and social trends. These causal factors are often bracketed as signs of so-called irrationality. They tied in with cultural and racial (even racist) stereo-types of the region,

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<sup>9</sup> Orientalist literature built on the work of a number of influential scholars who used the Middle East as a comparative model for other subjects of their work, such as Ernest Renan, Karl Marx and Max Weber, as well as the diaries and reports of high-ranking government figures who had been based in the region, such as Britain's Lord Cromer. By the 1960s, the work of orientalist scholars such as H. A. R. Gibb, Harold Bowen and later Bernard Lewis were particularly prominent. For examples of Lewis' work and the deterministic approach outlined above, see: *The Middle East and the West* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), and more recently, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002). 'Modernizationists' were an offshoot of the orientalist tradition, the most well-known being Samuel Huntington, author of the 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis. It is worth noting that Middle East studies did not exist per se – in the academy, scholarship on the region was largely the domain of philologists, while jurists and economists were relied upon for expertise outside of academia. The reliance on linguists meant that a knowledge of and access to ancient texts was often passed as qualification to comment on contemporary issues in the region. Zachary Lockman argues that these foundations meant scholars were not focusing on the more universally common features of the region, and moreover were inclined to view it through the temporally-narrow lens of the ancient and mediaeval texts they were familiar with. For an excellent overview of the development of Orientalism and Middle East studies, see Lockman's, *Contending Visions of the Middle East; The History and Politics of Orientalism* (CUP, 2010), and for a reassessment of orientalist histories see: Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer, Y. Hakan Erdem (Eds.), *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century* (University of Washington Press, 2006)



positing its leaders and social movements as irrational, unpredictable and even dangerous actors in contrast to the rationality and dispassionate behaviour of other, particularly western, international actors. As a result, the region was widely perceived as resistant and unsuited to the application of generic theories of IR.

While this approach still holds among some, regional scholars increasingly challenged this exceptionalisation of the Middle East, and argued that the theories and patterns of IR were universal and could be applied anywhere, including the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> In the process of demystifying the Middle East and opening it up to the same modes of social and political enquiry that were applied elsewhere, a flurry of research began to emerge to draw parallels between the Middle East and its global counterparts; of those theories being applied to the Middle East, the realist paradigm has been the most dominant.

Indeed, on the face of it, the insecurity and volatility of the region appear to justify realist interpretations of foreign policies in the Middle East; the dominance of the state and lack of institutional cohesion also lend to this view. The rise of International Relations as an academic discipline after the First World War took its cue from contemporary events: the break-up of empires, national self-determination, and institution-building on the basis of nation-states, all encouraged the use of the 'state' as the homogenous unit of analysis in IR;<sup>11</sup> therefore the relatively recent imposition of a westphalian state system on the region has meant it has often been viewed and portrayed, unwittingly or justifiably, as a modern Middle Eastern version of Europe's pre-war 'balance of power' system. In this context, in a move away from irrational stereotypes, ideational factors such as ideology and specifically Arab nationalism have taken a back-seat and are viewed in a purely instrumentalist light. Widespread instances of Arab collaboration with the US and the west, against the interests of fellow Arab states and regional solidarity, are presented as the clearest indications that pragmatism and competing national interests supersede what is deemed to be a weak and shallow ideological vision.

It is true that more recently scholars have moved beyond this limited scope to look at non-state relations and the interaction between 'peoples and societies'.<sup>12</sup> Fawcett argues, for

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<sup>10</sup> Among the early scholars breaking the mould were Anouar Abdel-Malek, Maxime Rodinson and Albert Hourani. Later challengers to the exceptionalist viewpoint include Gunder Frank, Roger Owen (focusing particularly on the importance of political economy in the region) and Fred Halliday.

<sup>11</sup> EH Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (Macmillan Press, 1946).

<sup>12</sup> Louise Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East* (OUP, 2005), 1.

example, that the two factors crucial to the understanding of the region and transcending the concept of the state have been pan-Arabism and Islam. And yet, despite this apparent movement away from basic notions of state-hood, territory and inter-state conflict, a cursory analysis of the region still appears to confirm material competition, a real scarcity of security, and an anarchical system in which there is no (effective) regional leadership or institutional representation at the global level<sup>13</sup> – little wonder, then, that this has led to conclusions of an ‘unfinished’ state-system that could be best explained through political realism.

In such circumstances, as posed by realists, the individual state relies on self-help and pursues material and strategic motives that are conducive to its national interests, be that mere survival and defence, or wealth and hegemony.<sup>14</sup> The drive is presented as an entirely rational one - attached to the overriding pursuit for stability, order, maximisation of potential - and measurable through positivist methods. Competition for resources, regular territorial and border conflicts (the Arab-Israeli conflict, Syria-Turkey, Iraq-Iran, Iraq-Kuwait) and the perceived instrumentalisation, indeed abandonment, of ideology for the sake of pragmatic state interests (Egypt-Israeli truce, Syrian-Iranian alliance, Syrian-Iraqi inter-Ba’thist rivalry) all appear to validate the realist argument. This seemed particularly true after the perceived failure of the pan-Arab ‘project’ in various regional conflicts, notably in 1967, and the subsequent decline of Arab nationalism in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup>

Although ideational accounts of foreign policy did begin to emerge at the height of Arab nationalism in the late 1950s and early 60s, Kenneth Waltz’s seminal work in 1979 on neo-realism prompted a strong revival of power-politics and material interests within the study of IR in general, this time shifting the emphasis away from individual agency towards a structural, systemic view.<sup>16</sup> With the publication coinciding with major ruptures and changes in Middle East politics that appeared to endorse the structuralist argument,<sup>17</sup> and

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<sup>13</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Waever argue that anarchy is reflective of a realist international system, whereas regional institutions and cooperation reflect a shift to international society and the decline of realism. See *Regions and Powers*, (CUP, 2003), 53.

<sup>14</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace* (5<sup>th</sup> edition, Knopf, 1978); for the application of the theory to a case study see Graham Allison, *Essence of decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Little, Brown, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> Fouad Ajami, "The End of Pan Arabism," *Foreign Affairs* 57(1978/9).; Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (Tauris, 2006), 12

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> Namely: Anwar Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem and the Egyptian-Israeli truce; Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and the Iranian Revolution. For the significance of these events in shaping the modern Middle East, from a neo-realist angle, see David Lesch, *1979: The Year that Shaped the Modern Middle East* (Westview Press, 2001).

thanks to its non-exceptionalist appeal,<sup>18</sup> neo-realism has for many years been seen as the most suitable interpretive framework for the region, by both mainstream IR and Middle East scholars.<sup>19</sup>

Following from this, the role of external powers and their capacity to influence the politics of the region is a theme that fits well within a neo-realist interpretation of the Middle East, since it places regional power and influence in the hands of homogenised state-actors with the greatest military capabilities. Societal factors (i.e. identity), and domestic politics within the Middle East states themselves play a peripheral role (if any) within this analytic perspective. Traditional Cold War historiography vis-à-vis the Middle East places explanatory emphasis on external agency, positing US involvement in the region in the context of the Soviet threat and vice versa. According to this view, Middle East states had little stake in US policy-making towards the region, neither diplomatically, nor by shaping events on the ground; as a result, the US' relations with individual states in the Middle East, the variance between those relations and the micro-level factors that led to conflict or alignment, are largely overlooked, or more commonly over-generalised in order to cover the region as a homogenous whole. It is true that US relations with Iran have had more attention than most other states due to the added dimension of 'political Islam' and the utility of Iran as a thematic case-study within that domain. But this specific attention has been extended only sporadically to other bilateral relations with the US.

Even those aiming to avoid this paradigm inadvertently reinforce it: Peter Sluglett in his analysis of superpower intervention states that prominent Middle East leaders – Nasser, Hafez Asad, Saddam Hussein – were adept at playing the superpowers off each other during the Cold War, and presents a classic case of “the tail wagging the dog”; but ultimately in his analysis those individuals fade into the background and seem to merely play the role of agitators in the far greater, global conflict between the US and the USSR.<sup>20</sup> This demonstrates the resilience of the neo-realist view that foreign policy, wars and truces are dictated by the need for a balance of power; that the US and the USSR were the major players in the system, while the smaller states either aligned or remained neutral in the interests of maintaining the balance of power. Syria, to take one example, is widely

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<sup>18</sup> Shibley Telhami, Michael N. Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Cornell University Press, 2002), 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> For example see Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, 1987); Buzan, Waeber, *Regions*, 217; Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiraven Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Lynne Rienner, 2002), 19-21.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Sluglett, *The Cold War in the Middle East*, in Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, 40-57

perceived to have swung between 'non-aligned' status and a 'satellite' of the USSR; as such it demonstrated little independent agency, being dependent on and swayed by its more powerful Soviet ally, or by the constraints of the system itself and the necessity of military equilibrium.

### **Realism and Syria**

If we are to assess the relevance of the realist theoretical approach to the focus of the thesis then, certainly, one of the most dominant interpretations in the literature of Syria's policy towards the US, and vice versa, is the realist one. Just as in the policy realm, academic discourse often posits Syria as a follower of Egypt's example. Under Nasser, Egypt had been seen as the leader of the pan-Arab movement; but with its shift to the pro-western camp and the subsequent political and economic gains that it made, scholars predicted similar repercussions for the entire region.<sup>21</sup> Syria as a fellow 'revisionist' state was expected to be the most severely affected; its disillusionment with Egypt and the pan-Arab movement was translated as a dilution of its own ideological drive.

Goodarzi, among others, positions Hafez Asad alongside Egypt's Anwar Sadat: both political pragmatists who helped to usher in a new phase of *realpolitik* at the expense of ideology.<sup>22</sup> In turn, Syria's foreign policies, specifically those towards the US, have been interpreted as straight-forward geo-political pursuits,<sup>23</sup> matching the US' interest-driven policy towards the region as a whole. Thus defensive, territorial concerns for Syria (retrieving the Golan Heights from Israel and preventing hostile encirclement by its neighbours) and hegemonic, security interests for the US (counter-balancing Soviet influence during the Cold War, safeguarding access to oil, and eliminating terrorist threats post-Cold War), are deemed to constitute their respective bilateral priorities in both diplomatic and confrontational settings.<sup>24</sup>

Alongside defensive-realist explanations, there are also numerous arguments based on the need to protect regime security at home. Thus if Syrian political rhetoric appears to display an intense ideological motivation behind its policies, it is to be remembered that it is just

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<sup>21</sup> Ajami, "The End of Pan Arabism."; Adeed Dawisha 'Requiem for Arab Nationalism,' *Middle East Quarterly* 10 (1) 2003

<sup>22</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 12; Humphreys, Stephen, 'The Strange Career of Pan-Arabism', in *Between Memory and Desire. The Middle East in a Troubled Age*: University of California Press (2005), 73-4

<sup>23</sup> Fawn and Hinnebusch, *Iraq war*, 129; Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 13; Rabil, *Syria, the United States*, xxi.

<sup>24</sup> Hinnebusch, Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran.*, 162; Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th v. Ba'th: The Conflict between Syria and Iraq 1968-1989* (Tauris, 1990), 136; Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years* (Chatham House, 1988), 3.

that: rhetoric. According to Owen, Syria has at times used extreme ideological language, not even for the purpose of regional legitimisation, but in fact to make it too dangerous for any other state to feasibly unite with its policy – in this way, he argues, Syria is assured that it never needs to follow through its empty threats and belligerent rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> Others argue, on the basis of Syria’s strict domestic authoritarianism, that the regime is merely motivated by the need to maintain its own security, and wealth.<sup>26</sup> Fred Lawson argues that the desire to protect the regime at home leads to the exploitation of events abroad to create a perpetual state of emergency and to smother potential dissent.<sup>27</sup>

Hinnebusch and Ehteshami’s analysis of Syrian foreign policy is more nuanced, certainly not so starkly realist.<sup>28</sup> The intense hostility between the US and Syria is acknowledged, and Syria is indeed described as one of the few remaining revisionist powers in the world, alongside the theocratic revisionists in Iran, which at first seems to imply an acceptance of ideology as an important influence on Syrian foreign policy. However, they stipulate that this revisionism is *not* an ideological one, but one that is based on systemic factors and the need to balance power in the region. Bureaucratic politics, exemplified by tensions between economic pragmatists and less-progressive ideologues, are portrayed as the main driving force behind outward revisionism, rather than an inherent ideological bent. They point to the ascendancy of the pragmatists such as Hafez Asad, to demonstrate the strategic emphasis of Syrian foreign policy over the past forty years. The authors associate this pragmatism with a dilution of ideology, certainly the revolutionary ideology which characterised the unstable Syrian regime before Asad’s seizure of power in 1970. They argue that the shift from a weak, fragmented, ideologically driven state, to a strong centralised actor, is in great part attributable to the authoritarianism and *realism* of Hafez Asad.

Overall, Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, having debated the possibilities, present Syrian foreign policy (which interestingly they not only associate, but also equate with Iranian foreign policy) as a rational one, reacting to the penetration of external global hegemonies and inter-state regional war, one that co-opts a degree of domestic-external “omni-balancing” to allow for bureaucratic politics, the need for public legitimacy and, above all, the retention of

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<sup>25</sup> Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Routledge, 2004), 64.

<sup>26</sup> Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (Zed, 2003), 9-14; Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 157-8.

<sup>27</sup> Fred Lawson, *Why Syria Goes to War: Thirty Years of Confrontation* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran*; . And see also *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 141-163.

relative autonomy for the leadership.<sup>29</sup> In many respects this analysis of Syrian foreign policy does challenge the realist account (it certainly opens up the proverbial ‘black box’ to look at internal politics); but in terms of motives, it is still very much tied to the realist preoccupation with material interests.

To sum up, in a realist assessment of US-Syrian relations ideology can act as a supplementary force and is used as a vehicle for legitimacy and mobilisation; however, it is not to be seen as genuinely-held values but as a “disguise” of the leader’s true power-political motives;<sup>30</sup> if a credible assessment of foreign policy is to be made then ideology should take a back seat to what are perceived as more substantial and urgent material interests. From the literature we can extract four key realist assumptions that have dominated any analysis of Syria, and by extension US-Syrian hostility. These assumptions undermine the role of ideology in Syria’s policy towards the US:

- i. There has been a decline in Syrian Arab nationalism following Egypt’s truce with the west;
- ii. Syria’s grievances with the US, and Israel, would dissipate should Syria’s own territorial dispute with Israel be resolved;
- iii. Syria’s authoritarianism means all power and decision-making resides with the President – its foreign policy reflects his personal motives and he is equitable to Syria;
- iv. reflecting the pragmatism of a regime merely interested in its own survival, Syria bandwagons or balances against external and regional hegemons and is swayed by fluctuations in the international system.

In support of these assumptions, periods of temporary reconciliation between the two states – demonstrated during the 1990-91 Gulf War when Syria aligned with the US against a fellow Arab nation, and post-September 11 when the US sought and received Syrian aid in intelligence for the ‘War on Terror’ – are explained through the realist paradigm of self-help and disregard for normative and ideational constraints. From a purely realist perspective, these instances of cooperation need not be viewed in a paradoxical light, as inconsistency and flexibility are the defining characteristics of pragmatist regimes.

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<sup>29</sup> Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran*, 24

<sup>30</sup> As explained in Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, 99; and see also Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (Routledge, 1991), 49.

## Reassessing the realist interpretation

The strength and utility of a realist perspective for the analysis of the Middle East cannot and should not be dismissed outright. However, this should not prevent it from being critiqued in the face of historical inaccuracies and failures to present societal complexities. The arguments and assumptions outlined in the previous section can be challenged on a number of fronts; there are, at best, missing components to a purely realist explanation of the US-Syrian case. I will briefly highlight these in relation to the four realist arguments put forward above.

### *i. The decline of Egyptian pan-Arabism and the 'domino effect' on Syria*

Let us begin with the notion that Syrian Arab nationalism has been in decline since Egypt 'defected' to the west.<sup>31</sup> Hinnebusch states that the insecurity arising from the 1967 defeat led states to resort to realist self-help, 'specifically, Egypt's pursuit of a separate peace with Israel upset the Arab-Israeli power balance, heightening the insecurity of other Arab states, notably Syria, and encouraging them to similarly look to self-help through militarisation and separate diplomacy.'<sup>32</sup>

But significantly, the above argument does not take into account the fact that Syria was vehemently opposed to the process of 'separate diplomacy', and consistently argued for a comprehensive approach that brought Egyptians, Syrians and Palestinians together to the negotiating table. The separate peace approach was chosen by the US and foisted on the Syrians against their choice.<sup>33</sup> Had Syria followed Egypt's example of signing a truce with Israel, especially given that Egypt was arguably a regional hegemon at the time, this would have been the clearest indicator that realist motives were now coming to the fore, especially since the need to be on a war-footing was just as detrimental for Syria's economic interests as it was for Egypt.<sup>34</sup> But instead, by 1979 Syria shunned diplomacy and took a very different direction sponsoring and supporting opponents of the US and Israel with even greater zeal than before. Given Syria's precarious position, both regionally and against the

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<sup>31</sup> Ajami, "The End of Pan Arabism."; Humphreys, Stephen, *Between Memory and Desire*, 580

<sup>32</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, *The Politics of Identity in Middle East International Relations*, in Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, 165

<sup>33</sup> Hafez Asad denounced Sadat's peace with Israel as a 'breach of Arab solidarity', arguing that the conflict with Israel was not just an Egyptian issue, but was an all-Arab one – refer to Asad's interviews with Damascus Radio, 8 September 1975, Newsweek 22 September 1975, cited in Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 103-104. For further elaboration on this divide see Chapter 5.

<sup>34</sup> Hopwood, *Syria*, 104-5; Leverett, *Trial by Fire*, 33-35

US, and with Soviet material support proving to be increasingly unreliable, this was a highly risky strategy to adopt in terms of Syria's military and economic security (indeed it resulted in the US imposing a series of sanctions on Syria). The fact that Syria was prepared to shoulder the risks of sanctions and isolation demonstrates that a purely realist explanation of Syrian policy is insufficient. Thus contrary to the predictions, Syria's recent behaviour does not indicate that it is about to imitate Egypt's example.

Such expectations do not take into consideration the different historical experiences of both Syria and Egypt that contributed in different ways to their collective identities. Whereas Egypt's territorial homogeneity was intact after the First World War and had remained the same for centuries, the break-up of *Bilad ash-Sham* into Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon meant that a wider Arab identity formed a constitutive part of Syria's identity from the moment its colonial boundaries were imposed.<sup>35</sup> Thus for Egypt, its about-turn in 1979 – seismic a shift though it was – constituted no more than a change in foreign policy; for Syria, this would have meant (and would mean) an overhaul of its identity, one that has directed its foreign policy since it acquired state-hood, and an acceptance of externally imposed borders.

This is not to suggest that Syria's pan-Arab identity is a 'primordial' nationalism, but rather that it has become socially and politically entrenched over time, and has influenced its politics and ideology. It is thus much more problematic, therefore, for Syria to discard Arab nationalism from its foreign policy than it was for Egypt.

Thus, Syria's adherence to Arab nationalism was in fact strengthened and augmented by the turning-points mentioned above. Goodarzi describes the 1970s as a decade of "disarray" and total confusion, following the failures of 1967, limited achievements of 1973, Egyptian 'defection' after the Camp David Accords in March 1979, and lack of resolution on the Arab-Israeli front. This may be an accurate assertion, and yet this does not, and did not, necessarily determine a decline in ideological zeal. On the contrary, it is just as likely to have enhanced it, particularly as Syria was fully aware that it was unlikely to fulfil its territorial and strategic goals through its own military capabilities (which were insufficient) or its own negotiating powers (which were still weak and lacking necessary leverage) – in such a scenario, ideology supported the strategic need for sustained resistance to external powers. As Patrick Seale argues, Egypt's 'long retreat' from the pan-Arab project, beginning

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<sup>35</sup> Asad explains that Palestine is in effect 'Southern Syria', and outlines they are the same community. See Memo of conversation, Asad and K, 25/6 February 1974, Middle East trip follow-up, RG 59, Briefing Books 1958-1976, Lot#75D146, Middle East Trip Follow Up 5/1974, Box 205



as early as 1961 with the failure of the UAR with Syria, followed by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the death of Nasser in 1970, did not dampen Syria's Arab nationalist ambitions.<sup>36</sup> In the eyes of the Syrians, Egyptian Arab nationalism was exposed as opportunistic and motivated by statist goals (it is worth remembering that Syrian Arab nationalism, both institutional and at a popular level, pre-dated that of Egypt's); thus Egypt's demise provided the Syrians with the opportunity to supplant them as the 'true defenders' of the Arab cause.

*ii. Territory or Ideology?*

Chapter two elaborates on a core argument of the thesis: that Syria's Arab nationalist ideology is primarily of a defensive-political, rather than a cultural, nature. Indeed, Syria's interpretation of Arab nationalism is argued by some to represent simply another manifestation of anti-imperialism. Realists might argue that, in fact, this viewpoint reinforces their argument. To some extent, anti-imperialism can be viewed as a product and manifestation of realist politics. It is concerned with material issues, and in particular, seeks to re-establish and protect state sovereignty – state boundaries, autonomy and national defence are at stake here, all traditionally realist issues. The fact that Syria's opposition towards the US has endured for so long is, according to the realist camp, simply due to Israel's continued occupation of the Golan Heights and the US's uncompromising support for Israel. If this territorial dispute were to cease, Syrian antipathy towards the US might not entirely disappear, but would significantly diminish. If the territorial situation improved, Syria would avoid overt opposition for fear of retaliation and a return to the status quo, as exemplified in Egypt's policies after the return of the Sinai. Traditional realists, such as Morgenthau, even argue that anti-imperialism is the ultimate disguise of imperialist revisionism,<sup>37</sup> which simply uses ideology and morality as a justification and cover for basic power-politics, and in Syria's case, ambitions for regional domination.

This realist view of anti-imperialism however is not sufficient, particularly in the Syrian case. Though it is often dismissed as rhetoric, the Syrian leadership and its political elite have been consistent in maintaining that even if the Golan Heights were retrieved, there could be no peace without the resolution of the Palestinian problem, while neutral and non-Syrian analysts have similarly argued that a resolution purely based on territorial issues is

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<sup>36</sup> Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, xviii-xix

<sup>37</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 106.

unlikely.<sup>38</sup> A deeper understanding of Syria's territorial and political history, and an acknowledgement of the high level of politicisation and mobilisation of Syria's population against colonialism since the end of the First World War,<sup>39</sup> demonstrates that its anti-imperialist ideology preceded and goes beyond its current territorial dispute with Israel, and will have contributed to the long-term development of Syrian identity. Moreover, imperialism itself constitutes an ideology, with a set of values and perceptions held alongside its territorial ambitions; in this case, anti-imperialism, in opposing an ideology, is ideological in of itself.

This argument is particularly pertinent when considering Syria's view of Zionism as an imperialist ideology, which it believes needs to be contested and fought with its own ideology.<sup>40</sup> The presence of ideology is further demonstrated by Syria's opposition to America's various regional policies (beyond just its support for Israel) on the grounds of perceived US neo-imperialism and unjustified intervention in other countries' affairs.<sup>41</sup> Thus to reduce Syria's policies to merely territorial ambitions is too simplistic.

### *iii. Domestic politics: a 'non-issue' for Syrian foreign policy?*

We now turn our attention to domestic influences on Syrian foreign policy towards the US, challenging the realist assumption that the regime's all-encompassing authoritarianism precludes any interaction between the executive and society. It is easy to dismiss the role of society in affecting foreign policy when power is so centralised with one person, as it has been in Syria. No doubt, the President has a direct bearing and influence on the continued relevance of Syrian ideology in both society and foreign policy, especially when his tenure has been a particularly long one, as was that of Hafez Asad. As a result, many analysts identified Syrian foreign policy under Asad senior as a straightforward reflection of his

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<sup>38</sup> For example: Interview with Hafez Asad (*Newsweek*, 25 February 1975, cited in Ma'oz, *Sphinx of Damascus*, 98-99); Lecture by Dr. Sami Khiyami, Syrian Ambassador to the UK (London School of Economics, 8 May 2007) and at the Syrian Media Centre (London, 16 June 2007); author's interviews with Aaron Miller and Martha Kessler, Washington DC, May-June 2009; Statement by Bouthaina Shaaban, Minister of Expatriates and Foreign Ministry spokesperson (*Arab Daily Star*, 5 June 2004, cited in Rabil, *Syria, the US*, 204-5).

<sup>39</sup> Rabil, *Syria, the US*, 1-33; Hopwood, *Syria*, 27

<sup>40</sup> For further exploration and interpretations of Zionist ideology see Halperin, E., Bar-Tal, D., Sharvit, K., Rosler, N., & Raviv, A. "Socio-psychological implications for an occupying society: The case of Israel". *Journal of Peace Research* (2010), 47 (1), 59-70.

<sup>41</sup> Author's interview with Syrian Ambassador to the UN, Dr. Bashar Ja'afari, UN HQ, New York, February 2009. When asked what grievances he had with the US administration, his first and immediate response before mention of Israel was: "Iraq". There are wider issues for which Syria opposes the US, based on Syria's ideological principles – thus demonstrating that its contention with the US would not dissipate entirely if its territorial dispute with Israel ended.

personal decision-making.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, prior to Hafez Asad's seizure of power in the 1970 coup, Syria had been prone to factional in-fighting, political incoherence and instability, which in turn had made Syria vulnerable to outside intervention, not just from enemies, but allies as well (seen in the failed UAR union with Egypt and increased involvement from the Soviet Union). Hourani states that with the arrival of Asad, the Syrian regime was transformed into a strong regime, "able to impose itself on the country and put an end, at least for a while, to the internal conflicts".<sup>43</sup> This analysis draws very much upon the notions put forward by the 'cult of personality' thesis, and places great responsibility and credit for Syria's transition from weak state to regional power, on the personality and leadership of the President. There are two main implications of this reliance on the 'cult of personality' thesis: (i) it marginalises the role of public opinion; (ii) it downplays the salience of ideology.

(i) Given Syria's authoritarianism, it is unsurprising that the role of *society* and *public opinion* as the source of a state's ideational drive is an area of foreign policy analysis that has been seldom addressed in relation to Syria. The centralisation of power by the leadership – singularly dominant and authoritarian by even Middle Eastern standards – and the deliberate ambiguity surrounding its domestic politics and civil society, has made the realist approach not only the most obvious, but also the easiest one to adopt vis-à-vis Syrian foreign policy. The prevailing view with regards to Syrian domestic opinion is that, due to the authoritarian nature of the regime, it has "never been taken into account" and is a "non-issue" in Syrian politics.<sup>44</sup>

And yet despite the repression, civil society, opposition movements and independent public opinion do exist in Syria, and must be seen as important considerations for the leadership when conducting foreign policy. The Asads, elder and younger, have been acutely aware of the need to be in line with mass opinion, and especially military opinion, in certain key issues. For the leadership, the risk always remained that the tension already created by the oppressive surveillance culture and stringent controls in public and intellectual life, may be raised to unsustainable and potentially violent levels, if an unpopular and unrepresentative foreign policy is added to the list of the many domestic grievances. Civil society has indeed been stifled in Syria and there is very little opportunity for the public to clamour for or initiate political change (the lessons from the bloody repression of the Ikhwani uprising in

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<sup>42</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 13; Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran*, 58-65

<sup>43</sup> In Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, xv

<sup>44</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 6

Hama in 1982 are still fresh and it remains a taboo subject, while the Damascus Spring of 2003 soon faded away; meanwhile the future of the 2011 uprisings remain uncertain, although the regime has once again adopted brutal tactics to repress them); but public opinion nevertheless plays on the consciousness of the president.<sup>45</sup>

In a state where there are such high levels of political curtailment, stifling of opposition and control of public, political, educational and even non-political religious affairs, the only legitimate and feasible outlet for public expression and fervour is in the realm of foreign affairs. Moreover, it is a realm where the views and wishes of society coincide with both the stance of the leadership, and the security interests of the state. To be sure, hostility towards the US is disseminated top-down through the state-run media, but anger and suspicion towards the global hegemon is also a genuine feature of grass-roots public opinion and it is tapped into by the state. This identity is perpetuated and regenerated through collective processes, not just at the societal level, but between the regime and the populace.

Certainly, Syria's identity, its sense of moral (if not political) leadership and responsibility in the region, feeds off the constancy of external great power intervention in both domestic and regional politics.<sup>46</sup> The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided the Syrian leadership with the perfect deterrence for internal disorder and revolt at a time when agitations for liberalisation were growing at home. But it is to be remembered that in Syria's history, there have been numerous dictatorships - Hafez Asad's was not the first. And under those dictatorships in which the ruler did not adhere to and uphold those deeply embedded principles held by the Syrian people – such as protecting Arab independence, resisting external interference and opposing Israel – Syria was at its weakest and most unstable, both at home and abroad.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This has been made starkly apparent by the uprisings since March 2011. The grievances at the heart of the protests are based on domestic issues – the imposition of emergency law, detention and treatment of political dissenters, and the brutality of the security apparatus. Notably foreign policy has not been on the agenda, and the mixed views on the protests within Syria can to some extent be attributed to broad public agreement with Syria's foreign policy. This is in contrast to the 2011 revolution in Egypt, which after focusing first on domestic grievances soon turned its attention to the deeply unpopular, pro-western foreign policy of the Mubarak regime. The extent of popular resentment built up due to Egypt's truce with Israel highlights the importance of adhering to principles and public opinion in foreign policy.

<sup>46</sup> This notion is supported by Carsten Wieland, who argues, on the basis of public, academic and media interviews that the Iraq War 2003 rejuvenated pan-Arabism/Ba'thist ideology in Syria, and its sense of purpose, at a time when it was under strain from competing religious and nationalist loyalties. C. Wieland, *Syria at Bay: Secularism, Islamism, and "Pax Americana"* (Hurst and Co. 2005).

<sup>47</sup> For greater detail on the instability of the Syrian regime before the Ba'thist revolution in 1966, see chapter 3 on the history of Syrian statehood and the politicisation of society. Notably, any leadership that carried favour with the US and relaxed its stance towards Israel was vehemently opposed by the public and the military and was soon removed.

(ii) The downplaying of societal input is connected to the second viewpoint that the cult of personality usually means a sacrifice of ideology. For just as that argument posits the leader as pursuing self-interests against the will of the people, it also suggests that ideology is either *compromised* or *exploited* only in order to maximise the leader's personal gains – be that the promotion of family interests or the purging of any challenge to the premier's power.<sup>48</sup> Particularly if the case can be made that a particular ideology permeates society through historical experience and consciousness (as this thesis does), the leader's dismissal of public opinion is seen to also implicate a dismissal of ideology, and vice versa. What such an analysis fails to consider is the leadership's own relationship with the ideology in question, which need not always be a phoney one. Unlike the numerous military dictators of the 1940s and 50s, Hafez Asad's political and even security outlook developed within a fervently ideological context.<sup>49</sup> In his important work on Syrian domestic politics, *Revolution from Above*, Hinnebusch states:

As the president became the main source of initiative in the regime, his [Asad's] personality, values, strengths and weaknesses became decisive for its direction and stability. Arguably Asad's leadership gave the regime an enhanced combination of consistency and flexibility which it hitherto lacked. The consistency of his policy was rooted in his political socialisation into an authentically Ba'thist world view, for his origins and career faithfully reflected on a personal level the saga of the Ba'th...<sup>50</sup>

Hinnebusch's depiction of Asad's rule does not contradict the view that the cult of leadership was and is prevalent in Syria; yet it also does not support the view that this necessarily means a discarding of ideology – on the contrary, given Asad's adherence to Ba'thism, his authoritarianism simply led Syria further down the same path. Further on, Hinnebusch goes on to state:

Determined, intelligent and dedicated to his mission, Asad proved extremely stubborn in pursuit of nationalist principle in the conflict with Israel. A tough Machiavellian, he seemed to use any means in the regional power struggle to defend his regime. Yet, as a pragmatic realist he was also prepared to subordinate ideology to the realities of power, hence to moderate Ba'thism to accommodate the interests of the Bourgeoisie at home and Arab donors abroad.

This passage appears to detract somewhat from the earlier statement on Asad's dedication to Ba'thism. The confusion over where Asad's policies are to be situated – either in pragmatic realism or in principles and ideology – appears to lie in the fact that when dealing with

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<sup>48</sup> Humphreys, Stephen, 'The Strange Career of Pan-Arabism', 74

<sup>49</sup> For greater detail on Hafez Asad's deep connections with Arab nationalist ideology, see chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup> Hinnebusch, *Revolution from Above*, 67-8

domestic issues, regime security, and intra-regional relations with fellow Arabs, Asad deployed pragmatism and power-political behaviour, while on the issue of Israel and with external players such as the US, Asad was uncompromising in pursuing Arab nationalist goals. This does not in fact amount to the contradiction it appears to be, but rather reflects an assessment of different priorities on the domestic and international stage. The defining principles of Arab nationalism, reflecting as it does a regional identity, chiefly relate to wider regional and international issues.<sup>51</sup> It is when *such issues are at play* that ideology similarly comes into motion.

However, this is not to suggest a strict internal/external binary, for as Fred Lawson argues, the two are strongly connected in Syria's case; but whereas Lawson makes the case that external disputes are cynically fuelled at times of domestic unease, I argue that this is too restrictive an explanation. Taking one's country to the brink of war purely to quell unrest at home is too high a risk to take, and which in the post-9/11 era can pose just as great a threat to internal stability (note the unsettling results of sabre-rattling from Saddam Hussein or Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). Thus to adopt and broaden these inside-outside connections, I concur that Syria's foreign policy is significantly guided by domestic factors, but delineate these as being a) the ideology of the regime; b) the ideology's reflection of principles held by society; and therefore c) Syrian society itself. As for Syria's domestic policy, this is not the focus of this study; therefore the impact of the cult of personality, authoritarianism, sectarianism and the need for regime security, on Syrian society and political dissent, have only tangential implications for the argument of the thesis.

#### *iv. Autonomy, Agency and Ideology*

This brings us to the systemic accounts of US-Syrian relations based on neo-realist theory: what of the view that Syrian foreign policy, as with all the Middle East states, has been, or is dependent on external hegemons? To what extent can we apply the 'balance of power' theory here? Theoretically, *strong* states are identified as the instigators of an alliance-building process, principally out of self-interest in order to maximise security and power base, while states *lacking security* and power on the international stage are generally expected to construct alliances with stronger states – in other words to 'band-wagon' in order to help their construction and maintenance, or to bolster their power within their own

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<sup>51</sup> For a deeper exploration and definition of the principles of Arab nationalism, as it emerged and is understood in the Syrian context, see chapter 2.

sphere of influence.<sup>52</sup> This theory is used to explain every major regional alignment, from the Cold War, to the Arab-Israeli conflict, to the Gulf War coalition in 1991. So of course, this should be doubly true of alignment *shifts*, as states break obsolete alliances and form new ones depending on convenience and material benefits, regardless of ideology or historical precedents.

Syria could technically be defined as a relatively small state, or at least in terms of its material capacity. And yet, apart from Syria's temporary (and important) alignment with the US during the Gulf War in 1991, the above bandwagoning trends have not been borne out. We might have expected Syria, according to such assumptions, to have struck more conciliatory relations with the US by now, particularly after the demise of its Cold War ally the Soviet Union, or to have followed in the footsteps of its larger and more powerful neighbour, Egypt. Either such moves would almost certainly have generated economic and political advantages for the current regime, and may have offered a more pragmatic, albeit compromised, realisation of its territorial and strategic goals. The examples of Egypt, Jordan and Libya (in the final years under Gaddhafi), all gaining financially through reconciliation, reinforce the strong likelihood of such an outcome; yet Syria has not gone down this path, despite the predictions of both academics and policy-makers.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, then, Syria possesses a high degree of autonomy from its regional neighbours and particularly from external hegemon – where does this independence stem from? Syria possesses very little offensive capability on a regional, let alone international level. Nevertheless, it has shown over the years that it is a force to be reckoned with.<sup>54</sup> One key difference between Syria and some of the other important players in the Middle East is that it possesses very little by way of natural resources – in particular, it does not possess oil, unlike Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran or Libya. Thus a major focal point of other regional states' relations with external forces is removed from the equation. This forces us to assess Syria's importance and utility for the US on entirely different grounds, and already steers us away from the narrow focus on strategic or imperialist national interest, which are traditionally (and aptly) offered as explanations for US intervention or interest in other oil-rich states.

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<sup>52</sup> Fawcett, *International Relations*, 174; Walt, *Origins of Alliances*.

<sup>53</sup> Ajami, "The End of Pan Arabism."; Stephen Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: the Middle East in a Troubled Age* (University of California Press, 1999); Hinnbusch in Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East*, 165.

<sup>54</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 10

And indeed a historical overview of US-Syrian relations and the impact on the peace process demonstrates that Syria *is* an important member of the region, with the political capability of affecting US interests and ambitions in the Middle East. This, of course, confers a degree of power and repute on the Syrian state, which in turn enhances its standing in relation to its neighbours. What, then, gives Syria the political leverage it has enjoyed in the region, when it has neither bandwagoned with the most powerful players in the region nor possesses much by way of natural resources? What factors have, over time, converted Syria from being an economically, militarily and structurally weak state, to a regional middle power<sup>55</sup> with a strong stake in any project for peace and stabilisation? And what actions and policies on Syria's part have forced recognition and consideration from both American and Soviet superpowers in the past?

For Hourani, this power status derives from the regime's ability to repress potentially destabilising *internal* opposition and conflicts, while Seale sees this influence as stemming from Syria's geographical and strategic centrality in the region, lying "at the heart of the Arab Asian power system where, for good or ill, it affects every political relationship in the region".<sup>56</sup> He also argues, however, that in the Arab world an alliance with Syria gives a state "nationalist legitimacy" – thus Syria's ideological status is clearly an important factor in Syria's regional political leverage. Thus despite the material disadvantages, Syria is, or at least attempts to be, an independent agent in the regional and global arena, demonstrating that systemic factors cannot be seen as the sole influence on US-Syrian dynamics.

### **Bringing back ideas**

While I have outlined the insufficiency of a purely realist understanding of US-Syrian relations, I am not attempting to provide a theoretical critique of the realist paradigm itself – this has been done thoroughly and expertly by others; indeed the realist-materialist debates retain such vigour precisely because they are regularly challenged. Instead, this thesis seeks to positively highlight the salience of, and potential in, incorporating an ideational perspective in analysing US-Syrian relations, without necessarily excluding materialist arguments.

The first place one might look in order to bring in an ideational component is Identity studies. This ties in well with a constructivist analysis, which challenges many of the

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<sup>55</sup> Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran*, 6

<sup>56</sup> Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, xvi



assumptions of realism. Identity certainly forms a key part of the ideational argument I am putting forward, but it does not constitute the full picture. Part of the continued problem in bringing identity into foreign policy analysis is that it appears to detract from the agency of decision-making and places the emphasis on social structures and embedded norms – their precise influence on policy cannot be tracked easily. This ambiguity, or epistemological ‘problem’, can hinder the credibility of the ideational framework. Moreover, it means analysts may find themselves falling back into ‘irrational’ explanations for foreign policies in the Middle East, and an unwelcome return to the early stereo-types of the ‘Arab mindset’.

In order to understand the agency and intentionality behind the policies of an actor, and from an ideational angle, Ideology – in the broadest sense of the term – needs to be brought back into the debate. When it comes to understanding the ideas that influence Syrian policy towards the US, identity alone does not produce and direct action. It is, however, a vital component within an adaptable Arab nationalist ideology in Syria, and which has both captured and shaped the experiences, political aspirations and outlook of a society. Arab nationalism’s initial emergence as a socio-political movement amongst both elites and the rank and file in Syria, means it has been a part of Syrian history and thus supplies Syria’s pan-Arab identity. Thus instead of separating identity from ideology, it can be argued that in this case, to adhere to ideological values is an affirmation of identity and vice versa.

While the discipline has accepted Identity into the fold, it maintains an uneasy relationship with ideology. IR scholars face the following dilemma if they wish to employ ideology as part of any foreign policy analysis, particularly in relation to the Middle East: That is, on the one hand, ideologies are considered as an intransigent, doctrinaire and dogmatic force in politics, thereby incapacitating actors when there is a need to compromise, even when the state’s security and national interests are at stake. To pursue ideological goals at all costs is therefore branded as radical, illogical – once again, irrational. On the other hand, if the actor is deemed to be acting rationally, then ideologies are seen as instrumental tools used to mask the reality of self-interest and personal gain. In other words, to be rational and genuinely influenced by ideology is seen as an incompatible position.

The first view takes us back to essentialist espousals found in orientalist literature, with connotations that his/her emotiveness prevents an actor from making the ‘right’ choices, reached through a scientific process. The second option falls back on realist, and also Marxist, outlooks that only power-politics matter, while ideas are merely used to sell

policies to society. As further evidence of the difficulty IR has had with the concept, and the confusion over it, we find that *both* these alternative viewpoints have been applied to the Syrian case. The neo-Ba’thist regime that came to power in the revolution of 1966 and took the country to the unsuccessful war of 1967 is widely held to characterise the first position; in contrast, the post-Asad era is cited as an example of the latter view.

Indeed Hafez Asad is attributed with being calculated and pragmatic, in many respects because of a perceived willingness to sacrifice ideology for the sake of political and strategic objectives; given that Asad’s rule brought stability to a previously weak and unstable country, this pragmatism earned him, and Syria, grudging respect from his international counterparts and even enemies. The tactics he employed in negotiations and ability to balance a number of precarious situations at home were deemed as anything but a show of irrationality. Moreover, the ruthlessness with which he dispatched domestic foes gave Asad a reputation as a Machiavellian, rather than an idealist holding on to any ‘altruistic’ Arab nationalist doctrine. As seen from the views of policy-makers and academics alike, Asad’s pragmatism meant Syria acquired a new reputation for caution and strategic prowess, and could not as easily be dismissed on the grounds of radicalism and irrationality, labels which had in the past undermined the stature and credibility of Syria as an international actor.

Thus it transpires that for Syrians too – in politics or academia<sup>57</sup> – to be labelled as ideological has pejorative connotations and something that representatives of the regime are keen to disassociate themselves and Syria from. Moreover, to be seen as an ideological actor too often provided opponents with a reason to avoid engagement with Syria, a trend that was detrimental to Syria’s goals and interests. Pragmatism, then, has become the byword for competent and mature government.

However, regardless of the image various parties want to construct for Syria, public disassociation from ideology – be that Arab nationalism, pan Arabism, Ba’thism or any other *ism* used to describe it – belies the ideational component in Syria’s foreign policy and relations with the US. Having said this, it is true to say that the way in which ideology influences policy is far more nuanced than is often portrayed. Moreover, *what* the ideology actually entails and the contexts in which it is deemed relevant also needs to be studied and

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<sup>57</sup> Interviews by author with: Syrian mission to the UN, Dr. Bashar Ja’afari (New York, 17 February 2009); Syrian Ambassador to US, Dr. Imad Moustapha (Washington DC, June 2009), Syrian Ambassador to the UK, Dr. Sami Khiyami (London, May 2007), Former head of the Arab League, Ghayth Armanazi (London, June 2007), Academic Dr. Murhaf Jouejati (Washington DC, June 2009).

clarified, especially as simplistic generalisations have contributed to some of the problems with studying ideology outlined above. Indeed part of the reason why there is a reluctance to turn to ideology as an explanatory factor is that it is almost always portrayed as something dogmatic, inconducive to adaptation and unable to respond to changes in the international system. This would be particularly relevant in the Middle East context which has seen regime changes and shifts in patterns of alliance and enmity.

However, as I argue in this thesis, what is required is a reassessment of the *nature* of ideologies, how they are integrated with other goals and motives, and how they influence any decision-making process. As set out in greater detail in the next chapter, this thesis posits that ideologies should be viewed as an evolutionary and flexible set of political *principles* and *values* that inform and guide, rather than fix, foreign policy. Moreover, I argue that ideologies do not necessarily contradict state interests and can in fact support a state's interests in terms of security, political kudos and identity. In this sense, pragmatism, as in Syria's case, need not be viewed as something that is dichotomous to its ideological principles.

### **Methods and Approaches**

To explore the themes and address the key questions outlined so far, the thesis adopts four approaches, which include analytical frameworks and general methodologies. These are: historical analysis and historical sociology; foreign policy analysis; constructivism; and securitisation theory.

The most important approach in this thesis is **historical analysis**. Firstly it is important to chart a historical narrative of US-Syrian relations over a long period, relying predominantly on primary documentation, particularly given the lack of scholarly literature on this specific case. Hobden states that, 'all social interactions are affected by what has gone before, and in the understanding of the present the past cannot be escaped'.<sup>58</sup> Thus such historical studies are necessary for a deeper understanding of a region that is regularly debated and analysed from only a contemporary angle.

Secondly, a lack of historical analysis – particularly with a case-study that has long-term roots – risks supporting, albeit unwittingly, a political position which legitimates the

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<sup>58</sup> Stephen Hobden, *International Relations and Historical Sociology : Breaking Down Boundaries* (Routledge, 1998), 24

contemporary status quo, simply because it happens to be the status quo; to take the present as the starting point of analysis serves to overlook and downplay the contested nature of particular historical events and developments. Viewing those changes as though they have become embedded norms - part of the established political landscape that actors need to work within – without applying historical scrutiny, is a normative position in of itself. For example, to analyse US-Syrian relations during the years of the Bush administration alone would be to work on the basis that US sanctions on Syria, Syrian support for Hamas and Hizbullah, and Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights are structural features of the Middle East. When things are adopted as structural norms, the capacity and potential for change are not given due acknowledgement. Thus through historical analysis, this thesis aims to avoid this pitfall.

Thirdly, the archival work carried out for this project facilitates discourse analysis to separate genuine motives and policies of the Syrian leadership from public rhetoric. This will help to debunk the claims of instrumentalisation of ideology when Syria is employing a consistent ideological policy even in private. In turn, this can then be compared with the private statements of Syria's regional counterparts, to demonstrate the difference in approaches when ideology is discarded from a state's policy considerations.

There are of course other historical studies written in a similar vein on the subject of Syrian and American policy in the region – as already mentioned, Lesch's work based on archival material on the Syrian-American crisis in 1957 is a good example of this; another is Helen Cobban's work on negotiations in the 1990s, which relies on interviews and official statements at the time. Arguably two of the most important contributions to the historiography of Syrian politics are Patrick Seale's *The Struggle for Syria* and his biography *Asad of Syria*. Both works contain a high level of rich historical detail, situate the Syrian case-study within regional and global contexts, and provide astute and consistent analysis. Of course, such works are utilised to inform the thesis; however, due to the depth of such studies, they mostly focus on a limited period of time, and therefore miss out on the long-term patterns in US-Syrian relations. The aim of this thesis is to employ the same level of rigorous historical research, but covering a longer time frame in order to produce a comprehensive overview and evaluation of US-Syrian bilateral relations up until the end of Hafez Asad's rule.

However, despite the advantages to a historical study, there are potential limitations. Focusing too narrowly on the narrative of a particular state, society or event can culminate in a distorted view of their ‘uniqueness’ and limit the study’s wider contribution. In order to make sense of the history, it needs to be contextualised within a broader framework and compared – be that with other events or states at the same time, or indeed across different chronological periods. This approach – that is **historical sociology** - reflects a combination of history (a search for the particular) with theory (a search for what is general). Historical sociology is a method to understand developments not at a given, static time in history, but *over a length of time*.<sup>59</sup> Thus it helps to make sense of incremental changes (for example in US-Syrian relations) and how certain events, policies, and individuals have contributed to an ever-evolving bilateral relationship. Furthermore, *International* historical sociology looks at the formation of the state – its constituents, both external and internal – and how that affects the international relations of the region and the state itself.<sup>60</sup> This is particularly relevant in Syria’s case, as shall be explored in greater detail in chapter three.

This approach ties in well with an overarching **constructivist** approach in that it recognises that different levels of relations (state-society, and state-state) are constituted by each other; a constructivist and historical sociologist approach also addresses the formation and shaping of ideas – identities, ideology and perceptions – as historical *processes*, which holds off simplistic, essentialist explanations.

**Securitisation theory** from the Copenhagen School is used in the thesis not so much as a method of study, but rather as a medium through which the convergence of material (so-called realist) factors and ideational factors can be better understood. According to a securitisation framework, the importance of ideas as a unit of analysis, and a catalyst in patterns of both amity and enmity, is fully recognised as a key component in issues of security.<sup>61</sup> This is relevant for this thesis given that US-Syrian relations are so bound up in the concerns and discourse of international and regional security. Traditionally, security has always been seen as the domain of realists and military-strategic studies; thus, given that Syria’s regional situation and relations with the US are inseparable from questions pertaining to the region’s security (for example: territorial/ border conflicts, nuclear proliferation,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (CUP, 2005), 35-40

<sup>61</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner, 1998)

terrorism, military intervention), it is unsurprising that Syria's foreign policy goals and security interests tend to be seen through a conventional realist lens.

However, securitisation theory posits a number of arguments that challenge a narrow, purely militaristic view of security: firstly, it is not just material factors (such as the state or territory) that get 'securitised', i.e. come under the protection of the state. It can also be non-material factors such as identity, even ideology. Securitisation theorists argue that anything can come under the realm of security, depending on the *values* and *perceptions* held by the actors.<sup>62</sup> This allows us to understand how ideational values and principles held by the Syrian state can become militarised and converted into security issues, without necessarily being a reflection of realist motives. Particularly as in Syria's case, and indeed that of the US and Israel, values, perceptions and identity are tied to material factors (such as land, and access to the region's natural resources); ideational factors then become inseparable from security issues and geo-politics.

Securitisation theory also acknowledges the role of societies, and the need for state leaders to successfully articulate what they deem to be security concerns to their people in order to deal with the threats that are faced. And finally securitisation theory also seeks to widen the focus vertically beyond the unit of the state, once again supporting the notion that the security and concerns of the state do not exist independently of a) its society, and b) its regional and global relations. It posits that these different levels – the state, regional and global - are interdependent and mutually constitutive (contrary to a purely realist framework). This has particular salience for the Middle East region, highlighting why Syria's Arab nationalist ideology still remains pertinent given this regional setting.

Finally, and tying in with the approaches outlined above, the thesis integrates **foreign policy analysis** (FPA) throughout. FPA provides the analytical tools with which to study the significance of different factors that come into play in a state's foreign policy. Whether this is the leadership and individual psychology, perceptions, public opinion, or the bureaucratic dynamics of the US State Department or the Syrian military, FPA will facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the relevant components in both US and Syrian foreign policies towards each other. Identifying the sources and drivers of ideational factors within their foreign policies will also be aided by this approach.

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<sup>62</sup> David A. Baldwin, 'The concept of security', *Review of International Studies*, 23:1 (1997), 5-26

## **Chapter structure**

The various approaches outlined above will be employed to different degrees in the five core chapters of the thesis. The chapter structure reflects the combined theoretical and historical approach adopted in this thesis, allowing us to identify distinct patterns in US-Syrian relations *across* time.

Chapter two is a theoretical and methodological chapter, following on from the theoretical discussion provided in this introduction, but will demonstrate in greater detail how an analysis of ideology can be effectively operationalised in this study. It draws upon the theoretical work of Michael Freeden, as well as other studies of ideology to discuss the difficulties in incorporating ideology in an empirical study, and reassesses the nature of ideologies in general to resolve much of the confusion and inaccuracies surrounding the subject. The chapter aims to define Syrian ‘Arab nationalism’ more accurately, and based on how it is interpreted and expressed in Syrian politics and society. The chapter untangles the various meanings that Arab nationalism has come to represent, distinguishing between Syrian and other interpretations of Arab nationalism, as well as clarifying the relationship, differences and connections between a ‘Syrian’ Arab nationalism and other competing ideologies (such as Socialism and Islamism). The chapter provides an operational framework that facilitates the analysis of ideology in US-Syrian relations in the rest of the thesis.

The following chapters incorporate historical narrative with integrated theoretical analysis. The chapters here have been split into the pre-1967 era, the inter-war years between 1967 and 1973, the post-1973 years of Disengagement, and the post-Gulf War period of the 1990s. I have chosen this framework to reflect the major historical junctures from the Syrian perspective, rather than the more well-known and utilised Cold War framework which reflects the historical junctures from an American and western perspective. Without doubt, the Cold War and its end had major consequences for global politics and economics, ranging from the global financial system, to nuclear armament to the impact of US unipolarity; furthermore, the Cold War, and the changes that it brought about in US foreign policy, have had a very important influence on US-Syrian relations, and for some Middle East states have shaped their entire foreign policy; however, this thesis aims to highlight the alternative world-views and national priorities that existed alongside the dominant agendas of the superpowers. Some events in history – such as the establishment of Israel in 1948 (roughly coinciding with the start of the Cold War), the Arab defeats of 1967 and Egypt’s truce with

Israel - sent far greater shock-waves through the Middle East than obvious Cold War watersheds, and are viewed there as turning points independent of the Cold War. And while those events became embroiled with the Cold War at the time, their implications have outlived US-Soviet rivalry and do not neatly conform to global historical turning-points.

Thus pre-Cold War, it is true that the US was viewed in a more benevolent light by the Syrians, especially when compared to the European powers; but this trend also continued shortly after the start of the Cold War when the US opposed Britain and France during the Suez Crisis. Syrian mistrust of the west and the US in particular certainly became exacerbated Mid-Cold War, but this did not come to an end with the demise of the USSR and end of the Cold War – ultimately their brief cooperation during the Gulf War in 1990 was a false dawn. Similarly, the post-9/11 era did little to shake the intractability of the Israel-Palestinian crisis; indeed it is worth remembering that the failure of the Shephardstown talks, the second Intifada and the ascendancy of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a year earlier, already set in motion the downward trend in US-Syrian relations. Clearly then, America and Syria do not share the same historical narratives or reference points, which has to some extent contributed to their poor relations and understanding – in this way, an alternative historical framework will help to highlight the divergence between Syrian and American foreign policy priorities.

In this vein, Chapter three provides a historical narrative of modern US-Syrian relations after Syrian independence and prior to the 1967 War, identifying: the historical roots of ambivalence between the two states; the origins of US involvement in the region; and the rise of the Ba'th in Syria. It follows the change in the American position from being a champion of Arab rights to the foremost supporter of Israel. It assesses the impact of the Cold War and the US' growing strategic interest in the Middle East on its relations and image among Arab states. It also takes a close look at Syria's domestic politics and the lasting legacy of the relationship between ideology and society. The chapter demonstrates the long-term causation and evolution of policies and stances elucidated in the latter chapters, as well as providing a regional and post-colonial context to the later developments.

Chapter four takes up the historical narrative just before the outbreak of the 1967 War, and relies on archival analysis and FPA to analyse the centrality that the Arab-Israeli dispute plays in antagonising relations between Syria and the US. The chapter looks at the rise of Hafez Asad in the Ba'th party and the evolution of the party, from its intellectual roots to its



domination by the military, and how that affected its involvement in the 1967 War; it also identifies the war as the first case of direct and public US support for Israel against Syria under Lyndon Johnson, as well as the first time the US and Syria were forced to engage directly with one another in the aftermath of the war. In this sense, 1967 marks a crucial watershed in US-Syrian relations. The chapter closely assesses the diplomatic impact of the 1967 War and how it shaped future policies of both Syrian and American governments – indeed I argue that modern US-Syrian relations can in large part (but not entirely) be traced back to this seminal period. Finally, the chapter analyses the shift in Syria’s approach once Asad comes to power in 1970, from a radical and overtly ideological position to Asad’s ‘pragmatic’ turn, arguing that this was not a dilution of ideological principles but a change in strategy – one that was not sufficiently capitalised on by the US.

The chapter draws heavily on primary sources from the US National Archives, Washington D.C and presidential libraries, plus relevant interviews. These two early historical chapters constitute crucial foundations to any assessment of US-Syrian relations, for they reflect the long-standing nature of the grievances on both (but particularly the Syrian) sides, and highlight the great need to understand and address the legacy of a) colonialism and b) the establishment of Israel in the Middle East in general.

Chapter five is a critical chapter in which Syria and the US finally engage with each other in direct talks after the 1973 war. It focuses on the Disengagement talks, aimed at seeking a resolution between Israel and the Arab parties, and draws an important comparison between Egypt and Syria who had very differing outcomes from the US-mediated talks – this is used to empirically highlight the impact of ideological considerations, when they are taken into account and when they are discarded. It serves to illustrate in detail why Syria did not pursue the same course as Egypt, and the lack of impartiality in US mediation tactics.

Finally Chapter six will focus on the theme of *engagement* and analyses a period of direct communication between Syria, Israel and the US during the Madrid process from 1991-96. The chapter examines whether the instances of cooperation do in fact demonstrate contradictions in Syria’s ‘ideological’ position, or whether they are consistent with Syria’s Arab nationalist principles and strategic calculations for the region. It is an important chapter that brings home the nuances of the overall argument of the thesis, and serves to demonstrate that a) the operationalisation of ideology in foreign policy need not be dogmatic, nor as straightforward as might be presumed on the surface, and b) the important

role of pragmatism even within an 'ideological' foreign policy, making it clear that ideology alone cannot be taken to explain every facet of state behaviour. The chapter also assesses the strategies of negotiation, the separate motives and perceptions, as well as the pressures – both internal and external – faced by both the US and Syria in these times.

Both chapters five and six seek to question the basic assumption that Syria has essentially played the role of a 'spoiler' and that its actions have primarily instigated poor relations with the US. The focus on different chronological periods is important to provide a comprehensive overview of US-Syrian relations across time, and to demonstrate why their disputes have not been resolved despite global and regional changes, and the changing contexts in which their interaction takes place. The analysis ends with the last days of Hafez Asad's presidency, a natural juncture in Syria's ideological policy. That is not to say that ideology ceased to play a role under the successor regime – the next phase in the history of US-Syrian relations is suitable ground for a future analysis on the prevailing hostility between the two states under the governments of George W. Bush and Bashar Asad, and the enduring role of ideology in their foreign policies.

The conclusion brings together the analyses of each of the chapters to produce an overall evaluation of US-Syrian relations. It brings the historical and theoretical analyses back to the central argument underpinning the chapters, to form a comprehensive explanation for consistent US-Syrian hostility and to reintroduce the importance of ideational factors in their respective foreign policies.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Operationalising Ideology and Defining Syrian Arab Nationalism**

Underpinning the direction of this study is the argument that ideology has made a significant contribution to Syria's foreign-policy decision-making, and in turn has affected its relations with the US. The introductory chapter problematised the case of US-Syrian relations, and outlined the insufficiencies of the existing literature. One of the key problems was the dismissal of ideology as an explanatory factor on account of apparent contradictions between Arab nationalism and the 'realities' of Syrian foreign policy; in turn, I highlighted the inconsistencies in the realist argument and suggested a (nuanced) ideational explanation. But before this can be demonstrated via the empirical chapters that will follow, more epistemological challenges to this hypothesis remain and need to be addressed: how can an ideational framework be operationalised? How can this argument be empirically demonstrated? How can the pitfall of reductionism be avoided? What are the nuances to this argument? The purpose of this chapter is to answer these questions. It aims to establish the theoretical coherence of the ideational argument, and to demonstrate how an ideational framework can be operationalised in the context of this thesis. Additionally, one of the main reasons why Arab nationalism is dismissed so easily as a significant factor in Syrian foreign policy is because of a misinterpretation of what the ideology represents, and a failure to distinguish between its core goals which are 'non-negotiable', and peripheral interests which are flexible and contingent. Therefore this chapter also aims to define the principles that constitute Syrian ideology, against which Syria's foreign policy can be more accurately measured.

The first section of the chapter addresses the epistemological questions concerning the operationalisation of ideology, and aims to do the following:

1. To identify and address the key problems realism and political theory have with ideology in general.
2. To propose an understanding and definition of ideology that will be applied throughout the thesis. This definition will contest the simplified reading of ideology often found in both theoretical and foreign policy literature.
3. To introduce a framework for analysing ideology.
4. To outline a method for applying this framework and measuring the role of ideology in foreign policy.

In the second section of the chapter, I demonstrate how the framework is to be applied to the specific case of Syrian ideology. This section does the following:

1. Applies the core-periphery framework to the intellectual and practical manifestations of Arab nationalism. What is its historical context? And what are the consistent core principles? To answer these queries I detach Arab nationalism from generalisations and assumptions, and place it under closer scrutiny to understand it more deeply.
2. In order to do this Syrian Arab nationalism is first situated in, and compared against, broader nationalist ideology; secondly its connections with socialism (often included as a tenet of Arab nationalism) are explored. Thirdly its relations with Islamism is addressed to juxtapose Arab nationalism with a rival ideology.

## 2.1 The 'Problem' of Ideology

To argue for the continued salience of ideology in contemporary IR is no easy task. The role of ideology in decision-making, norms and 'international systems', receives scant attention in theoretical and methodological debates, and is largely left to historians and regionalists. This can be explained by three developments in the discipline: firstly, with the end of the Cold War and Fukayama's declaration of 'the end of history', the study of ideologies in general appears to have less currency than it once had; secondly, beyond the debate between modernism and primordialism, Nationalism – one of the most common representations of ideology in IR - appears to have run out of steam in its capacity to throw up theoretical puzzles; and thirdly, those alternative approaches - such as constructivism, and particularly critical theory - where one might look to find challenges to the materialist paradigms in IR, have done little to dispute the marginalisation of ideology as an explanation for foreign policy. One might add world events as a fourth factor in addition to these disciplinary trends – for example, discussing nationalism in relation to the Middle East might appear to be particularly irrelevant given the widely held view that, with the accommodation of Israel, neglect of the Palestinians, and persistent inter-Arab rivalry, pan-Arabism is now 'dead'.<sup>63</sup>

To compound the estrangement, those works that do focus on the impact of ideologies routinely fail to address the concerns and justifications given for the discipline's disengagement from the topic, often presenting ideologically-driven actions and agendas as accepted fact, a 'given' that does not need problematising – much empirical and foreign policy analyses fall into this category, and it is in part due to this trend that greater bridges between structural theory, critical theory and the realm of FPA have not been made.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, some of these works will go the other way, paying too much deference to materialist frameworks and opting to present ideology as a purely instrumentalist vehicle.

I argue that these potential weaknesses in any ideological analysis need to be rectified via a three-pronged approach: one confronting methodological issues; the second providing a

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<sup>63</sup>See Ajami, "'Stress in the Arab Triangle.'" *Foreign Policy* 29 (1978), an argument subsequently reiterated in numerous works, for example: Tibi (1997); Humphreys (1999); Goodarzi (2006); Ayoob (2007).

<sup>64</sup>For a collaborative effort to bridge the divides between theory and FPA see Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne: *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, OUP (December 2007). The aims and content of the publication were discussed at the 49<sup>th</sup> International Studies Association Convention 2008, during which the editors and contributors highlighted what they identified as the mutual marginalisation by both fields (theory and FPA) within IR. While clearly making a laudable attempt to reconcile the old explanatory dichotomies between agency and structure, or between materialism and the ideational, *ideology* was cursorily addressed as a component of strategic interests and within the case-study on US neo-conservatism, which took the usual empirical turn common in straightforward historical FPA. Its theoretical breakdown was once again side-lined.

detailed analysis of the ideology in question, rather than relying on generalised assumptions; and the third being a historical analysis to scrutinise the role of ideology in the given case study (in this case US-Syrian policy) over time. Hence, before reappraising the definition of Arab nationalism, and since indeed, ‘the concept of ideology and ideological thinking is a slippery one’,<sup>65</sup> this section will proceed to provide a definition of ideology and a framework for its application.

### **2.1.1 Defining Ideology**

Any analysis of ideology depends on whose definition one adopts. For neo-realists at least, ideology is not a factor deemed influential in the international system and therefore remains largely undefined. Liberalism is itself an ideology, but conversely it also does not engage in much debate on ideology, partly because to acknowledge it would increase scrutiny on its values and practices as one set of choices amongst many others, thereby detracting from its universalist claims. We can, however, gauge a definition of ideology from critical theory, which (generally) defines it in a pejorative sense: unlike realism, critical theory has produced some of the most influential commentary and a vast amount of literature on this subject. The roots of critical theory can be found in Marxism<sup>66</sup>, which posits that ideologies are a tool of the elites to imbue the masses with false-consciousness, in order to make them easier to manipulate and control.<sup>67</sup> To assert, therefore, that policies can be based on ideologies is to be duped by the rhetoric of the leaders, who only use them to pacify their domestic populaces. The motivation for this is control – both economic and political. What we see, then, is a convergence between the realists and critical theorists in viewing the default goal in international relations as being materialistic, with the difference being that the former is merely analytical in its approach while the latter is normative and prescribes emancipation from this status quo. Ideology, therefore, is at the heart of the debate in critical theory, but in a way that discredits any function it might have other than to deceive – this, perhaps inadvertently, serves to support the realist starting-point.

However, I aim to steer the discussion in this thesis away from a *normative* and prescriptive debate about ideologies per se, to an analytical one. Raymond Geuss acknowledges that ideology can be understood in three different ways: the first is to view ideology in a purely

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<sup>65</sup> Cassels, Alan: *Ideology and International Relations in the Modern World*, Routledge (1996), xii.

<sup>66</sup> It is worth noting that many critical theorists have veered far from the Marxist model and have offered robust critiques of Marxism itself – but the intellectual roots of critical theory can be traced to the ‘false consciousness’ thesis of Marxism nevertheless.

<sup>67</sup> See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in Lawrence and Wishart (Eds.), *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (1976), 59-61

pejorative sense; the second is to view ideology in a positive sense; and the third is to recognise its descriptive value. This chapter (and thesis) will largely adopt the latter position, recognising that ideologies are prevalent in international relations regardless of the purpose they serve, and for that alone they are worth studying.<sup>68</sup> By descriptive value, it is meant that ideologies reflect the way a society and its political system operates, and enables both analysis and comparison by categorising systems and values. On 'descriptive' ideology, Geuss states:

...typically it will include such things as the beliefs the members of the group hold, the concepts they use, the attitudes and psychological dispositions they exhibit, their motives, desires, values, predilections, works of art, religious rituals, gestures, etc.<sup>69</sup>

According to this approach, to argue something is ideological is not pejorative, rather it is deemed important for its explanatory use. To a lesser certain extent, as will be clear from the definition offered below, the thesis also accepts elements of the positive view of ideology - that ideologies are often constructed to enable a group 'to satisfy their wants and needs and further their interests'.<sup>70</sup> Thus ideologies are utilised by states, organisations and societies to identify a consistent set of beliefs about the world they live in, which then helps to guide, as well as prevent contradictory, decisions. Notably in foreign policy literature, the prevalence of ideologies within western democratic governments is hardly disputed and accepted as a normal part of politics without assuming that they are only used to deceive, a characterisation that is mostly applied to non-western governments.<sup>71</sup>

The debates on ideology within critical theory warrant far greater discussion than can be provided here. Moreover, there are varying and at times contesting views among scholars as to the definition of ideology, but the preliminary aspects of the debate sketched out above are sufficient for this research. For the purpose of this thesis, and drawing upon some of the categories outlined by Geuss, I delineate a typology of seven core defining features which I argue all ideologies are predicated on, and which are applied to the Syrian case in this thesis. I identify them as the following:

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<sup>68</sup> See Humphreys who makes the same case for taking ideologies 'seriously': Humphreys, Stephen, 'The Strange Career of Pan-Arabism', 60

<sup>69</sup> Raymond Geuss: *The Idea of a Critical Theory – Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, CUP (1981), 5.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> In particular work on the US: see Adam Quinn, *US Foreign Policy in Context : National ideology from the Founders to the Bush Doctrine* (Routledge, 2010); Michael Doyle, 'Liberalism and World Politics', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80 (4), December, 1986, 1151-1169

(i) Firstly, an ideology is a set of both explanatory and normative beliefs pertaining to society and politics. Thus they ‘purport to explain *why* the world is as it is, *how* it came to be so, and what the *goals* of political action should be’.<sup>72</sup> The explanatory rubric of ideologies demonstrates the close connection between ideology and history – constructed history, certainly, but such histories are not merely created and used to justify ideological agendas post-conception, but already exist in prior form as experience, collective memory and actual events and changes, which constitute ideologies and appear to embed them in social and political reality; history, therefore, confers on ideologies both the claim to truth, and with that, the right to prescribe based on ‘lessons of the past’ and the wisdom of experience.

(ii) Following on from this first feature, ideology is also an expression of human agency and intent. Those who adopt ideological beliefs do so with deliberate purpose to cultivate a particular course in the political and social spheres, or at least consent to the activism of others on their behalf and cooperate with the ideological programme. This agency may be channelled into maintaining the status-quo, as is the case with conservatism, but this still involves decisive choices over which norms to pursue. Often, however, ideology acts, and is propagated, as a vehicle for *change*, reflected by the fact that ‘ideology’ as a term was first coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy in revolutionary France, a period representing turbulence and the ushering in of a new socio-political order. Thus ideologies are utopian,<sup>73</sup> but are also manifested as active social and political movements that promote idealism as a realisable objective.

In connection to this utopian turn, ideologies usually purport to offer a morally correct set of values, such as justice through equal distribution of wealth, freedom through self-determination, civilising through imperialism, or human rights through democratisation; thus altruism is often a core justification for ideologies. However, given that it is an articulation of intentionality, an interesting dilemma emerges over the moral or egotistical nature of ideological thinking. Thus on the one hand, the agency that is inherent to the concept of ideology appears to fix it to rational-choice theory and individualism in IR, which has developed quite firmly into a materialist school of thought and as an extension of classical realism. The forging of this connection can be traced to thinkers Hobbes, Locke and Voltaire, among others, who argued that human desires, in fact, stimulated and were the

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<sup>72</sup> Halliday and Hamza Alavi: *State and Ideology in the Middle East & Pakistan*, (Macmillan 1988), 5: (Italics used by the authors).

<sup>73</sup> Humphreys, ‘The Strange Career of Pan-Arabism’, 61



driving force behind reason, without which it would be stunted. Rational decision-making, therefore, no longer refers only to the presence of reasoning, but has come to be synonymous with pragmatism for the sake of material gain and survival.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, within the philosophical strain of political theory, such rationalism has been argued to be a process of *morality*. Kant distinguished between the ‘political’ (that is, action and intentions reacting to instinct and human needs/desire for power) and the ‘moral’, this representing an action and intention made after a reflection of what is right.<sup>75</sup> It is not necessarily the outcome, therefore, that determines whether an action is moral or power-political, but the internal process that produced the action – crudely put, acting on reason, as opposed to instinct and necessity, is a crucial facet of moral action. This would appear to validate the *potential* for ideologists, and by extension ideological states, to seek to act as moral agents in the international sphere.

(iii) Ideologies tend to be promoted as universal messages – for example, through the perspective of the English School, ideologies might be interpreted as favouring a solidarist system (either internationally or domestically depending on the ideological goals and interests of the state) rather than a pluralist one, at least in relation to alternative ideologies and political structures.<sup>76</sup> Ideologies have even morphed into systemic orders so that a differing narrative is interpreted not merely as a challenge to the ideology, but as a threat to regional or global stability in addition to its values – liberal democracy and nationalism are two such ideologies that have been entrenched within international political and economic structures, to the extent that nationalism, for example, is increasingly included among the primary institutions of international society in English School debates.<sup>77</sup> This demonstrates that ideologies begin as universal messages, and if successfully universalised, can appear to assume an ontological character.

(iv) Despite the universalising nature of ideologies, there are always competing and varying narratives within them, creating an *internal* pluralism in which ideas both oppose and

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<sup>74</sup> Parekh, B., in Benewick, R., Berki, R. N., and Parekh, B., *Knowledge and Belief in Politics*: Allen and Unwin (1973), 58

<sup>75</sup> Kant: see Kimberly Hutchings, *International Political Theory: Rethinking Ethics in a Global Era*. (Sage, 1999), 7-8

<sup>76</sup> See Kenneth Minogue, who likens ideology to religion on account of its claims to an insight of true knowledge superior to all its competitors, plus its claims to a criteria that can distinguish between what is true and false: ‘Ideology After the Collapse of Communism’, in Alexander Shtomas (Ed.), *The End of ‘Isms*’, Blackwell (1994), 8-10

<sup>77</sup> Linklater, A., and H. Suganami. *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment*: Cambridge (2006), 146.

overlap, giving a greater complexity to the broader concept upon which they are based. This means there can be different interpretations of, and within, the same ideology, which can focus on different issues at different times. There may be core and peripheral concepts, that can in turn create an overlap with competing or neighbouring ideologies, but they all still constitute the ideology as a whole.<sup>78</sup>

(v) Connected to this last feature, ideologies are not timeless, essential concepts, but are constituted by their broader social contexts.<sup>79</sup> Thus the principles and goals that shape them cannot be abstracted from the spatial, temporal and socio-political contingencies that are always reconfiguring ideologies. Consequently, ideologies can undergo adaptation and transition and will shift over time. This does not negate the role of ideologies, or necessarily reflect a crude manipulation on the part of ideologists to suit and pursue their own interests. Rather it demonstrates that ideologies need not be rendered obsolete by socio-political change or pragmatic realities, nor indeed are these concepts mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, it highlights the notion, as indicated above and as argued by Michael Freeden, that ideologies can have a positive function in organising and mapping the beliefs and experiences of society, creating priorities out of a tangle of interests and issues that then facilitates political decision-making.<sup>80</sup> The shifting of *core* ideological concepts to the *periphery*, and vice versa, reflects the changes in the concerns and priorities of its adherents; the very fluidity of ideologies does not necessarily confirm an internal weakness in their original policies, but according to Freeden reflects the continued dependence by society and decision-makers on an ideological framework to interpret and make sense of social changes and patterns<sup>81</sup> - this is an important factor, more of which will be discussed shortly.

(vi) As far as it is possible to make a clear demarcation between politics, society, culture, and economics, ideologies are not confined to the realm of politics. However, although ideologies consider a range of factors, they are still ultimately concerned with the way in which their principles can affect all such areas. In that sense, ideologies do *politicise* all the above spheres and thus it is argued here that, ultimately, ideology is a political phenomenon.

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<sup>78</sup> Festerstein, M., Kenny, M., *Political Ideologies* ( OUP (2005), 42-3

<sup>79</sup> Halliday, Alavi, *State and Ideology*, .1-7

<sup>80</sup> Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1996); *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2003). In support of this point, Kant further attacked the traditional view of rationality by refuting its ontological basis, arguing that there did not exist an internal world truth and 'order', but rather it was the perceiving (i.e. thinking) subject, who by making sense of her experiences and giving them meaning, imposed an order to the world that would otherwise be a chaos of experience.

<sup>81</sup> Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 75-82

(vii) Finally, ideologies are dependent on societal co-option; in other words they are, or at least their proponents seek to transform them, into popular movements. Analyses of ideological influences often become hoisted on the role of the leadership without giving due consideration to the connection between the regime and the populace in conducting ideologically oriented policies. The justification and continued relevance of any ideological agenda rests on the transmission of ideological values from top to bottom for the sake of legitimacy, but this also works the other way around through a bottom-up process: the executive is reassured and encouraged in its ideological zeal by popular mandate, even in authoritarian systems. Indeed, an ideological policy can only be sustained in such security-driven environments through this societal connection. Given that foreign policy is often a political and ideological expression of the state on the international stage, and given that the state's infrastructure and being is contested and consolidated within its urban centres, the source of ideological propagation and legitimisation must be looked for within those arenas.<sup>82</sup>

In turn, it becomes clear that the search for the roots of ideological consistency and adherence by the regime lies not only with the executive itself but also with the level of societal following. Furthermore, revisionist ideologies originate in the quest for an upheaval of the prevailing social and political systems in the desire for change – specifically a change that is adopted by many and, theoretically, benefits the majority. As discussed above, ideologies are essentially idealistic in their goals, driven by claims to morality.<sup>83</sup> Thus in such a context, regardless of how removed an ideology may be from this overriding principle *in praxis*, it must retain the collective element in order to even exist – indeed the success of any ideology is determined by ‘the degree to which they [articulate] with social movements’.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, it is in many circumstances meaningless to separate ideological motives held by the regime from its search for popular legitimacy, as if the latter necessarily negates the former. A regime driven by ideology is not devoid of pragmatic considerations as a result (why must it be?), for real ideologues will seek to propagate their vision to greater numbers as a means to its eventual realisation. With that propagation can come a real adherence to those beliefs and norms; it is questionable whether any group or individual, whether a social

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<sup>82</sup> Halliday, Alavi, *State and Ideology*.

<sup>83</sup> E. H. Carr, *Crisis*, 25-6

<sup>84</sup> Halliday, Alavi, *State and Ideology*, 5-6

movement, government or a leader, would be able to sustain such a high level of cognitive dissonance (as this would entail) between internal power-political motives and a false external moral outlook. Indeed, without the electoral checks and balances of a democratic system, authoritarian regimes in particular rely on ideology as a connecting force between regime and populace – from an entirely functional point of view such connections are indispensable to the management of any system. In short, ideologies are, by nature of their goals, methods and justification, social movements that are political.

The use of this typology enables us to identify the difference between ideology and identity, or ideology and mere interests. Moreover it also allows us to dismiss some of the misnomers which are at times used to negate the presence of ideologies in a given situation. If we apply the typology to Syrian Arab nationalism we can ascertain how it reflects the above ideological tenets:

(i) Arab nationalism is rooted in the historical experience of external interference in the region, particularly after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It offers its own explanations on why the Middle East went through so much turmoil in the beginning of the twentieth century, and why the region continues to experience seemingly intractable problems (namely colonialism and exploitation of its resources and strategic assets). This external interference was seen to be continued by Israel after the Europeans had departed. The ideology also serves a normative function in prescribing the antidote to this problem: opposition to all external interference and imperialist ideologies, in all its guises.

(ii) Syria's Arab nationalism is also more than just a reflection of identity. Identity is seen as something that is acquired without choice, whereas adherence to Arab nationalist ideology is a conscious choice. Arab identity is a key component of Arab nationalism, but not all Arabs will necessarily be Arab nationalist. Moreover Arab nationalism was conceived as a reflection of moral agency and a just movement against forces of oppression – but mostly external forces.

(iii) Arab nationalism is not universal in the sense that it is concerned with a particular geographical region. But Arab nationalists have tended to view the region's politics in a Manichean light, in which alternative ideological perspectives are mistrusted. American liberal-democracy and Zionism thus provide the perfect counter ideologies on which Arab nationalism can thrive. And hence Arab nationalists, at the grass roots level or at the state

level, have often found themselves in conflict with fellow Arabs of opposing ideologies (be they conservative regimes or Islamists at home).

(iv) The internal pluralism within ideologies in general is also manifested in Arab nationalism. Thus we can see differences among the intellectuals in the movement, the general public and the militaries that adopt Arab nationalism. There were different strategies between the revolutionary and more ‘radical’ Arab nationalists of the 1966 Ba’thist government, who believed in an offensive approach to achieve its goals, and the ‘pragmatist’ Arab nationalists after Hafez Asad took power who adopted a more defensive approach. Some strands of Arab nationalism prioritise Arab unity, some associate closely with socialism, whereas others will prioritise protection of Arab independence.

(v) Arab nationalism, like any other ideology, neither emerged nor exists within a vacuum. Particularly in Syria’s case, Arab nationalism was strongly shaped and guided by the political and social context at the time. Mistrust of external forces thus continues to be a defining feature of the ideology. Arab unity, on the other hand, has been harder to adhere to, in part because other Arab states have shown little interest in this principle. Another example of the ideology’s flexibility is the treatment of Turkey – initially mistrusted as the former imperial power, it was embraced by Arab nationalists when it demonstrated that it now shared some of their ideological goals.

(vi) Arab nationalism is a political phenomenon in that it views culture, the economy and religion through an ideological and political light. Culture, including Arabism, is co-opted for the political struggle; economic matters have similarly been subject to political agendas – thus during the 1960s, a socialist economy was seen as a way of advancing the political goals of the ideology. Religion is not dismissed entirely as is the case in Communism – it is seen as a part of Arab identity, but is not to override the key principles of Arab nationalism.

(vii) And finally, Arab nationalism gained momentum as a popular political movement in response to the turmoil after World War I. The pervasive impact of French colonialism in Syria and the accessibility of Arab nationalism’s anti-imperialist message gave it greater traction among a wide audience. The leaders have been a product of the societal adherence to ideology. That connection was far stronger before the institutionalisation of ideology under the Ba’th, but public opinion remains a significant justification for the continued pursuit of Arab nationalist goals in Syrian foreign policy.

### 2.1.2 Constructing a Framework for Analysis

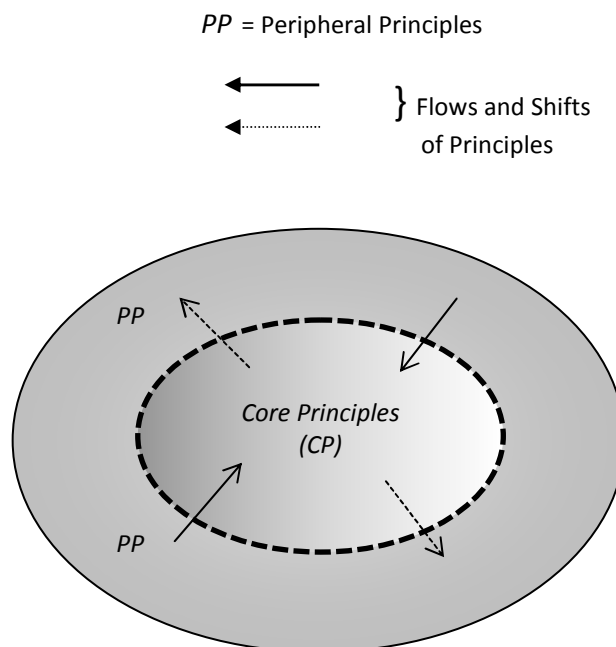
The above section provided a typology on the nature of ideologies, enabling us to identify an ideology when it is in motion within a foreign policy. This typology was then compared with and applied to Syria's Arab nationalism to emphasise the fact that we are indeed discussing ideology here and not merely identity or interests. However, one feature of the typology requires further explanation, this being point five regarding the adaptable and contingent nature of ideologies. Without deeper explanation, this could be misunderstood to imply that ideologies are ever-shifting, thus rendering the study of any ideology and its impact on foreign policy over a long time period as problematic. However, since ideologies are conceptualised and promulgated as a clear set of principles, any adaptation is likely to occur in a more structured way.

To aid this explanation, I build on the work of Freedman to argue that ideologies are comprised of *core* principles and *peripheral* principles. The core principles are the *raison d'être* of the ideology, and are less likely to change or shift in importance. They are still grounded in historical context, and their relevance is still dependent on particular political or social circumstances; but both context and circumstance are deeply embedded, structurally, empirically and as an inter-subjective social consciousness – such sedimentation of an idea is hard to alter. These core principles are the most important standard against which an actor's adherence to an ideology should be measured. Moreover, in order to identify what those core principles are, one needs to return to the historical-sociological roots of the ideology – the purpose for which it was conceptualised and formed.

Beyond these core principles, there are also *peripheral principles* in the ideology. These are unlikely to have constituted the original purpose of the ideology. They are also more contextually restricted – temporally, geographically or within a particular socio-political setting. Often peripheral principles are adjoined to the ideology because they support and strengthen the core principles and goals. In a scenario in which pursuit of a peripheral principle might threaten or contradict a core principle, then it would be compromised if needed; and if it is deemed no longer useful to the core goals of the ideology, it may be discarded altogether. The boundaries between the core and peripheral principles are not fixed and unchangeable. Peripheral principles can increase in their ideological value and can shift into becoming a core principle. This can also occur vice-versa, with a core principle becoming relegated to a peripheral principle; but due to the embedded nature of an *original*

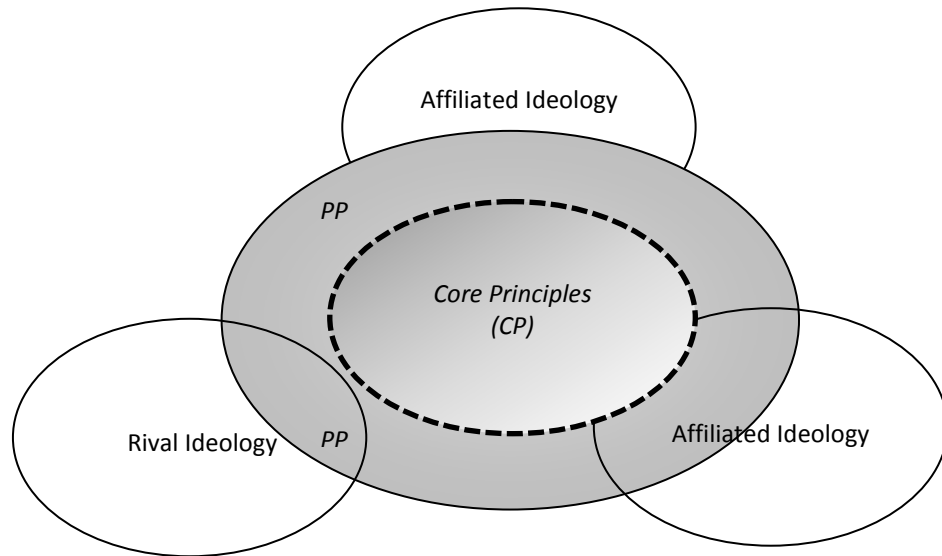
core principle, this is far less likely. This framework for understanding the relationship between core and peripheral principles in an ideology is illustrated in Figure 1.

Fig. 1: The Core and Peripheral Principles in an Ideology



Furthermore, the principles of a given ideology are not exclusive to that ideology. They will not be shared *entirely* by another ideology; otherwise the distinction between the two would be rendered obsolete. However, there can be overlap between some principles, be they core or peripheral. As a result, ideologies can sometimes be confused with similar or overlapping ideologies, and they can be interpreted as being the same or as always being connected. This is not necessarily the case, and overlapping ideologies can remain estranged regardless of the connections. In fact these can often become competing or rival ideologies. As they might share principles that appeal to the same social constituency and claim to have similar (if not identical) goals, the competition for legitimacy and support can be fierce (for example between Arab nationalism and Communism, or Islamism). Where there is regular overlap however, ideologies might avert conflict and instead become affiliated; and if the affiliation is long-standing the coalition of ideologies can come to be identified as a broad ideology in of itself (such as Arab nationalism with Socialism in the 1960s). Once again, however, whether ideologies are affiliated or cease to be so depends on the historical context and a number of contingent factors (which will be highlighted later). Figure 2 below illustrates the relationship between different ideologies.

Fig. 2: *The Relationship between Ideologies*



While the above argues that ideas can evolve and move within an ideology, it does not explain in what circumstances this might occur, nor does it tell us much about the ideology's relationship with politics and society externally. For the process of ideological construction and implementation is not purely endogenous – external factors play an important role in shaping an ideology's goals and principles, and in producing a relevant context in which it can operate. This link is illustrated in the models below. By geographical context, it is meant that some ideologies have macro-level concerns, for example they might have been formed to address regional or international issues and as a result they are not always relevant in a domestic setting. This can be true the other way round, where a domestically-concerned ideology is not applicable in an international setting (although this is less likely as local ideologies will often influence an actor's foreign policy agenda significantly).

External actors can also affect the implementation and salience of ideology – if an actor's allies are using rhetoric or pursuing policies that are ideological, there will be an added commitment for the actor to support them (for example the policies of Hamas or Iran will have an impact on Syria's ideology). Similarly, if an enemy is overtly ideological in its motives and policies (such as Israel), this will supply greater provocation for an ideological response. It is also possible, indeed very likely, that the implementation of ideological policies will feed back into the external factors to make them more ideologically charged. This would then perpetuate the salience of ideology in a given situation.



Fig. 3: The Contingency of Ideological Formation and Initial Implementation

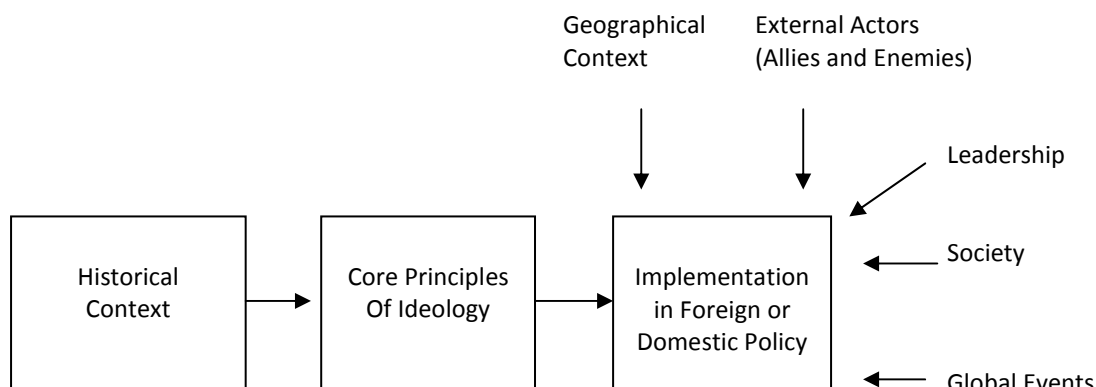
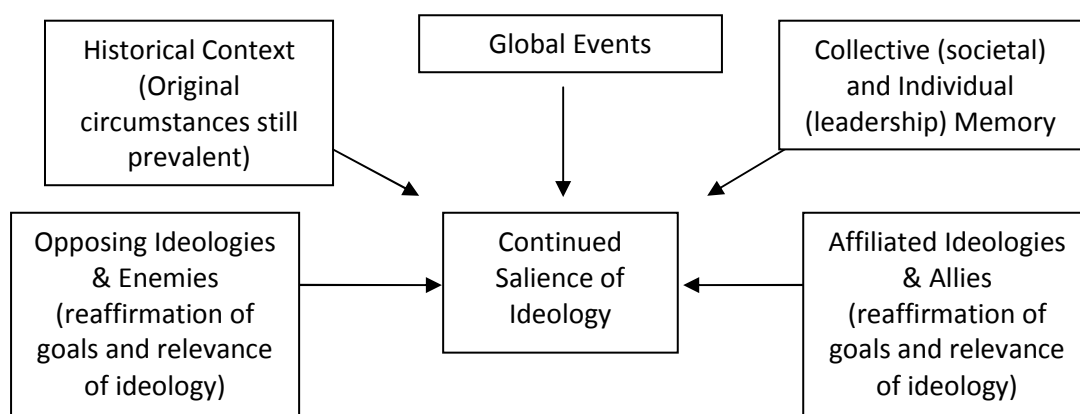


Fig. 4: The Contingency of Ideological Salience over time



Based on this framework, if we know what are: the core principles; the peripheral principles; what are its competing or affiliated ideologies; and what are its opposing ideologies; then we would have a clearer idea of what the ideology is, and importantly what it is not. If we also take into account the factors that influence ideological implementation, then we also have a clearer idea of: when ideology is being implemented because of the contextual relevance; when it is not implemented because there is a lack of contextual relevance; and finally when it appears to have been discarded despite it potentially being relevant in the context.

If the above factors are applied, it would have a significant impact on the reading of ideology in the Syrian context – its meaning, its manifestation and implementation in

domestic or foreign policy would be understood as a more *contingent* phenomenon. If functioning ideologies are read as being inherently contingent, we would then need to reassess the charges of hypocrisy often levelled at ideological actors. That is not to say those charges are refuted altogether – depending on the actor and the context, those charges may well be accurate. But there should be a more robust criterion for measuring whether, or the extent to which, an ideology has been discarded or compromised.

One final caveat remains with regards to operationalising an ideological framework. Using the above models, we can identify: what is an ideology; what are the core ideas and principles of that ideology; the contexts in which the ideology is likely to be more salient within a state's foreign policy. But how do we even trace ideological motives within a state's foreign policy? The question of 'measurement' and ascertaining causation remains a key problem with any ideational explanations. Without a sound method for quantifying the presence of ideological motives within foreign policy, the deeper understanding of ideologies provided by the above frameworks becomes detached from the concrete policies of states and the empirical sources used in this study. Moreover, without such a method it would not be possible to falsify an ideological explanation – the inability to falsify an explanation which is presented as an all-encompassing formula, in fact undermines its credibility. Thus to avoid this pitfall, I propose the following methodology to connect the above theoretical frameworks to the empirical and historical investigations of the thesis.

How we measure the importance of any factor and its role in causation is a concern for the social sciences in general, which often cannot rely on the quantitative and 'objective' methods of the natural sciences. John Stewart Mill sought to confront this problem with a research method in which the use of questions can be used to deduce which factors are more significant and which are less significant in a social or political phenomenon.<sup>85</sup> As with all such methods, it cannot be used to categorically determine a particular causal explanation, but I will use it to highlight the significance of ideology, rather than claiming to prove that it is the sole causal factor behind US-Syrian policy-making.

According to this method, if a variable (in this case, ideological motives) was not particularly significant, it would capitulate when placed under pressure. Thus we would need to analyse whether ideology is a continuous variable even under situations of pressure.

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<sup>85</sup> J.S.Mill, J.M. Robson. *A system of logic, ratiocinative and inductive : being a connected view of the principles of evidence and the methods of scientific investigation*, (Toronto 1973)

In Syria's case, the resilience of ideology in its foreign policy, even when the conditions would suggest a discarding of ideology would better serve its self-interests, would act as a strong indicator that ideological factors are at play. Thus the following questions should be posed of Syrian foreign policy:

1. At times when the Syrian regime was under pressure from the US to comply (under sanctions and the threat of force), how did it react?
2. When Syria lost the support of its allies because it still held to ideological principles, while they did not, how did it react?
3. When Syria was offered significant concessions to discard its ideological position, particularly through material and financial incentives, how did it react?
4. When Syria faced a possible failure of its goals, what impact did this have on its ideological policies?

This set of questions is by no means exhaustive; moreover it would only provide a comprehensive and reliable picture of Syria's foreign policy, and its connections with ideology, when used to analyse Syria's policies over a long period of time. However, it does provide us with an effective way of measuring the extent to which ideology is a factor in Syria's policies towards the US; from there we can seek to understand *why* ideology might still be a factor, using the core-periphery and contingency models outlined above. Comparison will be used to bolster this method in two different ways: firstly, a comparison between Syria's reactions and the reactions of neighbouring states who had discarded ideological factors; secondly, a comparison of Syria's reactions in different historical periods, in order to understand the circumstances that produce continuities or indeed discontinuities in Syria's foreign policy and the salience of ideology.

Mill's methods allows us to recognise the nuances and complexity of causal analyses. Even if the above measurement enabled us to ascertain the importance of ideological factors in Syrian policies towards the US, it cannot and should not be used to rule out other factors. This method recognises the possibility of multiple causes – thus to use this approach is not to claim ideology is the sole factor behind a particular policy. Other causes could include: self-interest; regime stability; public opinion; personal views of the leaders; external factors forced on the decision-makers. However, what this method helps to demonstrate is that the variable under scrutiny is a necessary component for a particular outcome. In this case, it would enable us to demonstrate that ideology is an 'insufficient but non-redundant' factor in

the history of US-Syrian relations. The thesis will seek to demonstrate that among the set of conditions needed to have produced such a degree of mistrust between Syria and the US over the decades, ideology has been one of them. To further strengthen the argument, I will draw together the analyses from the historical chapters in the conclusion and compare them with counterfactuals and factors that can be used to falsify the argument.

The next section of this chapter will apply the core-periphery distinction (shown in figures 1 and 2) to the various ideas associated with Syrian Arab nationalism to filter out the principles that most accurately define Syrian ideology. This will enable us to identify the core values of Syrian Arab nationalism<sup>86</sup>, its affiliated ideologies, competing ideologies and indeed those ideologies and principles that have erroneously been associated with it within the literature. First I will analyse Arab nationalism as a whole, and examine a) how it fits into nationalism, and b) how it relates to the principles within nationalism, namely the roles of culture and liberalism. It will be argued that it shares nationalism's drive for independence and autonomy, but that it is far closer to anti-colonialism in its goals. Second I will assess Syrian Arab nationalism and its connections with an affiliated ideology – that of Socialism. This analysis is then extended to Arab nationalism's relationship with the rival challenge of Islamism, a key competitor in the Middle East region.

The last parts of this methodology (the contingency models in figures 3 and 4, and Mills' methods) will be applied in the conclusion, using the findings from the historical-empirical chapters of the thesis.

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<sup>86</sup> When referring to the ideas of Syrian ideology, and its manifestation as a social movement, it is more accurate to use the more generic term of Arab nationalism, although this term remains problematic – as shall be explained in the next sections – and is remains contested. Ba'thism (referring to the Arab nationalist party, the *Ba'th* - meaning resurrection in Arabic) is often used interchangeably with Syrian Arab nationalism. However, this term is a more accurate description of the institutionalisation of Arab nationalism in Syria, and the interests of the party, rather than the ideas and principles of the ideology it was founded on.

## **2.2 Core and Peripheral Principles: Situating Arab Nationalism within Nationalist Ideology**

The first task here is to identify the core principles of Syrian Arab nationalism. While the Ba'th party in Syria, which founded itself on Arab nationalist ideology, distilled its core principles as: 'freedom from occupation, Independence and Arab Unity', much of the literature simplifies Syria's Arab nationalism as simply another brand of nationalism. This implies that we could, therefore, simply look to the core goals of nationalism to understand Syrian ideology. However, to rely on a theoretical dogma alone is not enough as this needs to be measured against internal evolutions in the ideology, and crucially, how it has come to be understood in *practice*. Thus even though the term nationalism has been attached to it, to what extent does Syria's ideology constitute a form of nationalism at all? In order to answer this query, the core principles of Nationalism itself need to be understood and defined accurately.

### **2.2.1 Defining Nationalism**

Nationalism, as Hutchinson and Smith put it, 'is one of the most powerful forces in the modern world'<sup>87</sup>: it had a major influence on the American and French Revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, both key turning-points in western political and social history; in promulgating ideals of citizenship and equality on the basis of national identity, it helped to politicise civilians within those states; and in the long-term, as it emerged as the dominant ideology in Europe through state-based industrialisation and revolution during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it served to entrench the westphalian system as the modern order, giving it a moral legitimacy and an ideological, as opposed to just a utilitarian, character. The following provides a basic outline of nationalist principles in the European intellectual tradition.

For Rousseau, nationalism was an expression of loyalty to the political institutions and laws holding a community together; thus national symbols, history and culture are useful insofar as they prevent absorption of the nation's identity into another and foster loyalty to the aforementioned institutions.<sup>88</sup> Herder, however, argued that common political identity rests not on polity but shared *culture*, especially language, for political institutions are created and external to innate human nature, whereas unity through common language reflects one's natural state. Given this emphasis on a 'natural', cultural cohesion, Herder criticised the use

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<sup>87</sup> Hutchinson, J., and Smith, A. D. *Nationalism*: (OUP 1994), 3

<sup>88</sup> F. M. Barnard, *Self-Direction and Political Legitimacy: Rousseau and Herder*, (Oxford 1988)

of political force and centralised bureaucracy to bind communities together. He underplayed the propensity for rivalry and conflict by arguing that there can be many nations of equal value, existing through peaceful coexistence.

In summary, both Rousseau and Herder (despite differing over the weight given to culture or politics), along with other ‘founders’ such as Fichte and Mazzini, saw the cultural and political coming together - the latter chiefly being reflected in their calls for autonomy, self-government and popular freedom: for communities to live together, there needed to be order and obedience to laws, while that could only be achieved through a sense of belonging arising from egalitarianism.<sup>89</sup>

John Stuart Mill’s later work followed on from this, bringing nationalist and liberal ideals together in that he argued *any* shared sentiment can engender nationalism, regardless of religion, race or culture; in line with the principle that individuals have the right to associate with whom they choose, he also made the case for shared and representative government.<sup>90</sup> The German historian Heinrich Von Treitschke offered an alternative view to the liberal-nationalist concept that a sense of belonging must include freedom of association, arguing instead for the primacy of *territory* in defining one’s nationality, and that fulfilling the territorial promise of a nation was an ‘historical task’.<sup>91</sup> Among the early European exponents of nationalism, Mazzini is the one notable intellectual to promote insurrection and armed struggle as a means to a more just, egalitarian, nationalist end.

Reflecting the variation in the above definitions, two alternative interpretations can be identified within the broader discourse on nationalism. Gershoni and Jankowski delineate an ‘idealist’ and cultural perspective on the one hand, and a political approach on the other.<sup>92</sup> The first, promulgated by Ernest Renan (1882), Arnold Toynbee (1915), Hans Kohn (1944), Karl Deutsch (1953) and Benedict Anderson (1983) among others, treats nationalism as an organic product of, and force for, social cohesion through modes of communication, language, shared geography, history and religion. The second perspective – held by the likes of Elie Kedourie, Gellner and John Breuilly (1993) – while not discounting culture once

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, and see J. Breuilly, *Nationalism* (1994)

<sup>90</sup> J. S. Mill (Gray, J., ed.), *On Liberty and Other Essays*, printed in Festenstein, Kenny, ‘*Political Ideologies*’, 271-4

<sup>91</sup> H. Von Treitschke, from *Politics*, printed in Festenstein, Kenny, ‘*Political Ideologies*’, 274-276

<sup>92</sup> Gershoni, I., and Jankowski, J. (Eds), *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*. New York, Columbia University Press (1997), ix-x

nationalist movements are in motion, essentially sees nationalism as ‘an ideological style of politics’,<sup>93</sup> which proposes that ‘the political and national unit should be congruent’.<sup>94</sup>

As with all such ideologies, nationalism is not static; it is prone to fluctuations, alterations and evolution, being contingent on varying socio-political circumstances – thus the division between what constitutes ‘cultural’ and ‘political’ nationalism can often be blurred. Certainly political forms of nationalism will adopt familiar historical and cultural symbols to legitimise and substantiate projects that are, after all, nominally based on notions of popular representation and empowerment. Ultimately though, we can identify the core principles of nationalism from this discussion as being: common political identity, founded upon and driven by a common culture (language and ethnicity) – the desire to bring the two elements together generates the principles of autonomous government, achieved via either cessation from other political unions, or unification of smaller entities. Thus if culture and political autonomy are the core principles of nationalism, liberalism (popular representation, individual rights, religious pluralism based on secularism) has emerged as a very strong *affiliated* ideology. In some manifestations of nationalism, the coalition has been so strong that they form a unified ideology, for example in the US. Although nationalism is found in all parts of the world, including authoritarian regimes, the libertarian associations with nationalism even in varied contexts still remain in theory.

Where then does Arab nationalism sit within an ideological framework that largely emerged out of Europe? And what are the areas of overlap and variation? I will address the three principles of nationalism in turn: culture, liberal values and political autonomy.

### **2.2.2 Arab Nationalism: A Cultural or Liberal Project?**

It is true that both the cultural and liberal project can be strongly traced in the *intellectual* history of Arab nationalism, where a deliberate, secular and cultural project akin to (and indeed borrowed from) Eurocentric nationalist accounts is outlined. Sati al-Husri was a key figure in the development of Arab nationalism as a cultural phenomenon, as a set of ideas that referred not just to the political context of colonialism, but also to (it was hoped) a more enduring, positive conceptualisation of Arab consciousness and identity. His works leaned heavily on the form of nationalism espoused by the likes of Herder, Fichte and Arndt, focusing especially on the commonality of language as the cohesive element in an Arab

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<sup>93</sup> Kedourie, Elie. *Nationalism*: (New York 1961), 18.

<sup>94</sup> Gellner, E. *Nations and Nationalism*: (Blackwell 1983), 1.

*cultural* community that would in turn develop into a united political community.<sup>95</sup> As C. Ernest Dawn highlights, Arab nationalism has often been explained as a (mainly secular) Arab awakening instigated by increased contact with western science and secularism: Rifa'ah Rafi' al-Tahtawi was one example of those Arab intellectuals who eulogised the west as an inspiration for Arab nationalism.<sup>96</sup> On this basis, little distinction can be made between Arab nationalism and European nationalist models. Further supporting such a view, there is no escaping the origins of nationalism as an ideological reflection, legitimisation and promotion of the 'nation-state' – a product of the Europeanisation of world order through the westphalian state system, in which sovereignty, territory and autonomous temporal rule are paramount,<sup>97</sup> as opposed to alternative political or religious concepts that have an accidental, secondary connection to territory. As a result of the intellectual roots, scholars still defer to Arab nationalism's apparent cultural roots when offering a definition. Rashid Khalidi, to take one example, summarises Arab nationalism as:

[T]he idea that the Arabs are a people linked by special bonds of language and history (and many would add, religion), and that their political organization should in some way reflect this reality.<sup>98</sup>

However, all the above can only be argued in theory. In practice, the intellectual movement within Arab nationalism has on the whole been unsuccessful in mobilising either popular opinion or regional foreign policies on the basis of culture; while aspects of liberalism, including civil rights and representative government, have also been completely sidelined in the internal politics of those states with claims to Arab nationalism. In fact, these are the two areas where the practice of Arab nationalism has differed most from western models of nationalism.

Addressing culture first, we can say that it is certainly important in that it provides a geographical boundary based on common language wherein Arab nationalism can operate. However, in terms of the intellectual cultural project outlined above, Arab nationalism has fared poorly in secularising traditional and even modern religious cultures. It does have an appeal, but mainly for Arab elites, many of whom have been educated in the west or within

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<sup>95</sup> Tibi, Bassam, *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Macmillan 1997), xii.

<sup>96</sup> C. Ernest Dawn, referring to the view popularised by George Antonius, Elie Kedourie, Hisham Sharabi and more recently Bassam Tibi: 'The Origins of Arab Nationalism' in Khalidi, R. Et al (Eds), *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, (Columbia University Press 1991), 3-5.

<sup>97</sup> See Bull, Hedley, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*: New York (1977), 33-38, cited in Tibi, '*Arab Nationalism*', 1.

<sup>98</sup> Khalidi, R., *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, vii



western institutions in the Middle East.<sup>99</sup> Attempts to then translate common cultural identity into *political* projects have been largely fruitless: the collapse of the UAR between Syria and Egypt between 1958-61, and the ineffectual Arab League that still operates but barely registers on individual foreign policies and has little international leverage as a collective policy unit, are two examples of unfulfilled idealism based on a united cultural identity. Here I should make a distinction between Arab nationalism and Arabism; whereas the former is an ideology, the latter is not, but rather it relates to the promotion of all the cultural facets shared and expressed within Arab identity without political aims. Thus I am not suggesting that Arabism is not widespread— Arabic and Arab film, music and literature, for example, are all very popular and are shared across the region. However, if they are then harnessed for a specific *political* agenda, it is more often than not because they connect to anti-colonial sentiments parallel to the political campaigns of the ideologists.

Part of the difficulty for Arab nationalism in using existing culture for greater political goals, is that it encroaches on other loyalties that have ample cultural *and* political substance to foster socially cohesive identities at local levels. Two such loyalties will be briefly highlighted here (although they could be broken down even further to include tribal, ethnic and sectarian loyalties): these being statist nationalism and Islam.

The first concept, statist nationalism, has taken root as an inevitable by-product of practical realities. As Humphreys states:

[State] boundaries that were purely colonial fictions created out of thin air in 1920 by Britain and France for their own convenience – had become sacred and immutable in 1950.<sup>100</sup>

State patriotism, as an obstacle or challenger to Arab nationalism's regionalism, has emerged in all of the Arab states, and most influentially in Egypt and Iraq. Humphreys argues that an Egyptian, as opposed to Arab, nationalism was crystallised by British occupation in 1882, articulating a strong sense of historical and cultural identity that had long existed within its stable geo-political boundaries; thus, in this sense, Nasser's Arab nationalism marked a temporary interlude before Egypt returned to statism under Sadat. Donald Reid argues that

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<sup>99</sup> Simon, R. S., 'The Imposition of Nationalism on a Non-Nation State: The Case of Iraq During the Interwar Period, 1921-1941', in Gershoni and Jankowski, '*Rethinking Nationalism*', 87-105; furthermore, narratives of populist Arab nationalism are predominantly within the context of an anti-colonial struggle, see Seale (1986); Gelvin, J. in Gershoni and Jankowski (1997); Haddad, M., in Khalidi et al (1991).

<sup>100</sup> Humphreys, 'The Strange Career of Pan-Arabism', 60-82

Pharaonic symbolism has provided Egyptians with a strong counter-nationalism,<sup>101</sup> predating Arabism and connecting them to an overlapping African identity as well.

Similarly in Iraq, while initially Arab nationalism was employed to foster greater cohesion among its ethnically diverse population, ideological sentiments were to a large degree subverted under Saddam Hussein's rule – conversely so, given that it joined Syria in the ranks of Ba'thism in 1966 and that Hussein was most vocal in extolling pan-Arabism in his foreign policy. As Wieland, Humphreys and Tripp argue, the regime's self-interest and 'Stalinist' repression, and the alienation of the Kurdish and Shi'a populations, prevented a greater level of ideologisation of Iraq's security-driven priorities.<sup>102</sup>

Moreover, Iraq frequently departed from an Arab nationalist agenda by hailing its separate Mesopotamian past. Indeed, notwithstanding the personal, power-political rivalry between the leaders of Syria and Iraq, Syria's perception of Iraq as corruptors of Ba'thist ideology contributed to their mutual antipathy. Such counter-cultures were effectively channelled into political projects of state-building, which rivalled and hindered the intellectuals' calls for political unity based on a broader Arab culture.

The second challenge highlighted above, Islam, has provided important cultural symbols, historical narratives and idioms, which are often used by Arab nationalists to encourage the very sentiments that its own secular, cultural discourse fails to invoke. Islam in some ways is the more problematic of the two competing loyalties highlighted here, at least conceptually: while Arab nationalism can at least purport to be a separate phenomenon from *state* nationalisms, which are at times denigrated as products of western colonialism, its cultural symbols often collide with similar unifying concepts in Islam – for example the *Ummah*, historical 'heroes' such as Salah al-Din Ayyubi, and even Arabic as a revered language (albeit for differing rationales).<sup>103</sup> The Syrian regime, for example, regularly employs the above religious reference points among others to simultaneously serve its

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<sup>101</sup> Reid, D. M., 'Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past: Egyptology, Imperialism, and Egyptian Nationalism, 1922-1952', in Gershoni and Jankowski, *Rethinking Nationalism*, 127-150

<sup>102</sup> Wieland, C., *Syria at Bay*, 22; Tripp, C., 'The Foreign Policy of Iraq', in Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 167-193.

<sup>103</sup> *Ummah* defines the non-political global community of Muslims, and is regularly appealed to in 'establishment' mosques – this has been particularly noticeable since the 2003 Iraq War and influx of Iraqi refugees to Syria; Salah al-Din, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Kurdish military leader who defeated the Franks at the Battle of Hattin (3<sup>rd</sup> Crusade) in 1187, and is buried in Damascus. See Husain, Shahnaz, *Muslim Heroes of the Crusades*: Ta-Ha (1998) for the Islamisation of his status and historical importance, while Ba'thist appropriation is reflected by national commemorations in Syria to mark the anniversaries of Salah al-Din and the Crusades; further highlighting the above point, when asked in an interview who his role models were, Bashar Asad replied 'Muhammad, Jesus and all the prophets in Islam', see *Al-Anbaa*, 26 May 2003.

ideological goals and tap into the population's religious loyalties. It should be noted here that Islam does not necessarily provide a uniform identity that automatically fills the 'cultural void' of nationalism as promulgated in Islamist thought,<sup>104</sup> indeed it accommodates localised cultural pluralism; nor is there such a high degree of religiosity in Arab society that only an Islamic culture appeals; but it is the case that the more generic cultural references that Arab nationalists would seek to draw upon tend to be framed in a religious context, thereby helping to raise their authenticity.

Thus the cultural project of Arab nationalist ideology as articulated by its chief proponent Sati al-Husri has not succeeded because, on the one hand, state-based nationalism resists the homogenisation of interests, identities and collective action, while on the other hand its symbols and emotional appeal are often absorbed within Islam, reserving little for the banks of a secular transnational loyalty.

Where, then, does this leave the *liberal* programme that became attached to many of the successful nationalist movements in Europe, and which was ideologically adopted by Arab nationalist doctrines.<sup>105</sup> In practice the two ideologies have been very divergent on this front. Most European nationalisms became attached to the concept of citizenship, and thereby a route to economic, political but also social transformation; it often represented the emerging middle class whose social upward mobility was previously prevented by the dominance of elites seeking to preserve their influence and stake within the state.<sup>106</sup>

Popular franchise, human rights legislation, civil liberties, thus became the goals of liberal nationalist movements in Europe; although those movements had varying and in some cases very questionable success, these principles eventually became fixed on the states' constitutional and political landscapes, not just theoretically but to a significant degree in practice as well. To take Syria's case however, the Ba'th party failed to bring about its original constitutional goals for domestic freedoms and representation. Rather the democratic process has been thoroughly stifled and civilian freedoms have been sacrificed to safeguard the interests and authority of the minority regime. Indeed it is Syria's

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<sup>104</sup> Jamal al-Afghani argued that Islam 'had proved itself superior to other forms of association. Hence the pre-Islamic Arabs did not manage to generate major cultural achievements': Tibi, B., '*Arab Nationalism*', 165

<sup>105</sup> For examples, see Seale, '*Struggle for Syria*', 153-156, for the Ba'thist founders' 'humanitarian brand' of nationalism (in particular noted in footnote 11).

<sup>106</sup> Bull, '*The Anarchical Society*', 42

authoritarianism and repression of dissent that is at the heart of a materialist, power-political diagnosis of Syrian foreign policy.<sup>107</sup>

This divergence in the outcomes of the European and Arab nationalist movements can partly be understood by recognising that the context of repression and domination that the nationalist movements were challenging was different in Europe and the Middle East. In Europe, the struggle for equality, representation and recognition of ‘the masses’ was contested mostly within states through *civil* wars and internal revolutions;<sup>108</sup> in the Middle East, and indeed throughout the ‘Third World’, nationalist movements were essentially anti-colonial with the struggle for equality and freedom transferred to an international level, contested between the local populations and their external colonisers. This is not to say that conflicts did not exist internally *within* the old colonial states. Certainly in Syria, as elsewhere, there was internal struggle for equality and resentment towards the dominance of ruling Syrian elites, many of whom were formed under colonial rule. But as Halliday and Alavi argue:

While the ideologies of power and opposition found in these societies are, in the first instance, concerned with internal, domestic, conflict, the issue of external relations and the role of external forces is always central and forms a vivid part of the world view that sustains such movements.<sup>109</sup>

In recent history, those in power in Syria have been very successful in dealing with the opposition. Certainly, domestic conflict is always of paramount concern; but the holders of power have so successfully crushed any organised form of dissent in the past as to make it an untenable and desperate business. The uprisings in the spring of 2011 marked a dramatic change in the public’s willingness to challenge the leadership, but for many the brutal crackdown by the regime will have confirmed their existing fears.<sup>110</sup> In such circumstances,

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<sup>107</sup> George, *Neither Bread nor Freedom*, 11.

<sup>108</sup> Even during the pan-European revolutions in 1848, the conflicts were state-based and framed internally between the ruling elites and monarchists on the one side, and the workers and peasants on the other. Much of Europe’s political change and development has taken place within an internal context, in that both crises and resolutions have largely emerged out of the region itself. The role of the US as mediator and aide in both European and Middle Eastern affairs is not on a comparable footing given the different social, political, and ideological contexts, and the differing nature of US power and influence in both regions.

<sup>109</sup> Halliday and Alavi, *State and Ideology*, 3

<sup>110</sup> Prior to the uprisings, even the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria had conceded that outright opposition was a fruitless venture, despite a potentially large, domestic constituency that they could appeal to. Ali sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni, the Head of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood exiled in London, made conciliatory overtures towards the Ba’thist regime when Bashar Assad took over power in 2000, highlighting the commonality of their goals against Israel and the West, and stressing the importance of Arab unity (although this was largely dismissed by the regime as rhetoric designed merely to reinstate the movement’s operational status in Syria). See Gary. C. Gambill, ‘Dossier: The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’, *Middle East Monitor*, Vol. 1:2, April/May 2006: [http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0604/0604\\_2.htm](http://www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0604/0604_2.htm)

external relations and the role of foreign forces that was already central, gains a heightened importance among both the forces in power and those in opposition. Thus in practice, Arab nationalism does not represent the liberal project, while those calling for domestic reforms recognise that Arab nationalist ideology is not intended to offer a solution to local grievances, and is chiefly relevant at a regional level.

### **2.2.3 The Search for Political Autonomy: Roots in Anti-Colonialism**

This leaves us with the principle of political autonomy as the remaining connection between Arab nationalism and broader nationalist ideology. With the cultural project lagging behind as a predominantly elitist agenda, and the liberalisation of domestic politics never having taken off, Arab nationalism (meaning the *ideology*, and not Arabist culture or identity) has emerged as an overwhelmingly political and anti-colonial movement, especially in terms of its popular appeal; its potency is based on anti-hegemonism and resistance to external intervention in line with other non-aligned movements during the Cold War.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, the legitimacy and continued relevance of Arab nationalism among the masses is dependent on this principle, with which it can appeal to both secular and religious elements in the region.

Thus while Bassam Tibi may describe Husri as ‘the spiritual father of Arab nationalism’, and while it may well have been the case that, in terms of its cultural and intellectual basis Arab nationalism was inherently an extension of European ideology, such characteristics were pushed into the background when it came to political mobilisation. For all the romanticism and cultural references in Arab nationalist literature, the ideology’s potency, practical resonance and political realisation has been manifested since its emergence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a struggle for political and economic autonomy from external great power domination, whether during the Arab Revolt in 1920, the Syrian uprising against the French in 1945, the 1956 Suez crisis or even during the failed wars of 1948 and 1967.

Certainly, statist nationalism and decolonisation in the Middle East and the old Third World sat concomitantly on the political agenda of anti-imperialists – for the practical realities of the international system made integration and representation contingent on the nation-state. And for most Arab leaderships, the statist format became fixed and accepted as the new

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Meanwhile, recent allegations and disputes between the regime and the Brotherhood have again focused around Syria’s conflict with Israel, demonstrating the important role the wider regional issues plays in domestic discourse.

<sup>111</sup> For example see Rami Ginat, *Syria and the Doctrine of Arab Neutralism : from Independence to Dependence* Sussex Academic Press (2005)

status-quo.<sup>112</sup> But despite this ‘westernisation’ of the regional order, and its willing co-option by elites, a dissatisfied, foundationally revisionist ideological movement remained - and of all the Arab states, it had the most room to manoeuvre in the fragile and dysfunctional Syrian state. As long as the hegemonic ideology, be that European colonialism or ‘Wilsonian liberalism’, or Zionism, was and is seen to legitimise the existing order and the region’s structural inequalities, it remains *in principle* challenged by, Arab nationalism.

Anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism is not in this case an instrumental principle en route to Arab solidarity and eventual unification; in fact it has come to be the reverse, that Arab solidarity is sought in order to close the door on external meddlers, and is most prized at times of opposition against an external power such as the US. It is not an exaggeration to state that the *raison d’être* of Arab nationalism, as it has developed and has been applied by its political exponents, is this opposition to external hegemony and interference. Meanwhile, Arab *unity* (especially *pan-Arabism*) on the basis of shared culture has been pushed to the margins as a peripheral principle of Arab nationalism. Even so, this is not so far from the intellectual origins of the Ba’th party, for whom nationalism symbolised first and foremost a struggle against colonisers, before embarking upon any cultural programme. The Ba’th claimed to present a comprehensive political programme with its three fundamental principles being: ‘Freedom from occupation; Arab independence and unity; socialism at home’.<sup>113</sup> Originally, as founders of the party Salah al-Din Bitar and Michel Aflaq explained:

[W]e saw nationalism simply as a struggle between the nation and the colonizer...In the country those who helped the foreigner were called traitors and those who opposed them nationalists.<sup>114</sup>

The founders later attached a cultural and intellectual ‘awakening’ to their doctrine, but it was nevertheless *instrumental* to the struggle for autonomy:

To be effective, the struggle against the colonizer had to involve a change of mind and of thought, a deepening of national consciousness and of moral standards.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Indeed the Arab league voted against the proposed unification of Syria and Jordan tabled by King Abdullah in March 1946, preferring the existing state-system established under the 1945 Arab League Charter and headed by Egypt. See Stephen Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon Under French Mandate*, (Oxford, 1958), 352.

<sup>113</sup> The Constitution of The Baath Arab Socialist Party of the First Party Congress: General Principles 1947

<sup>114</sup> Salah al-Din Bitar and Michel ‘Aflaq, *al-Qawmiyya al-‘arabiyya wa mauqafuha min al-shuyu’iyya* (1944); cited in Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 149

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

It should be highlighted that the anti-imperialist concept is not, in this case, inter-changeable with simple anti-westernism. The dispute is a political one, not based in culture or xenophobia, as reflected in the above passages; this is further demonstrated in the activation of Arab nationalism against both western and Arab forces alike.<sup>116</sup>

The above places a high degree of emphasis on Arab nationalism as an anti-colonial struggle, and brief mention now needs to be given to those powers and ideologies against which it has been, and is currently, directed. The clearest enemies of Arab nationalism in its early stages were the European colonisers of the Middle East, Britain and France. The physical occupation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century transformed an uncertain, intellectual concept into a social, ideological movement, and made it a necessity and an obligation for Arab politicians and the masses alike. A proto-Arab nationalism had initially focused its efforts on the Ottoman Turks, but this soon fizzled out with the break-up of the empire and arrival of the Europeans.

Zionism, and later Israel, joined the ranks of Arab nationalism's ideological opponents (little distinction was made between Zionism's fundamentalist and liberal strands<sup>117</sup>); as with the Europeans, there was no ambiguity over Israel's role as colonisers of Jerusalem, reminiscent in the view of Arab nationalists of the Crusaders – regardless of religion or race (although both could always be exploited), this point was sufficient to foment an enduring hostility, demonstrated initially towards Israel's very existence, later towards its policies and interests.

The later and current opposition towards the US and its Middle East policies is a less straightforward Anti-colonial stance: the US had always castigated the European powers for their colonialism in the region, and until the 2003 Iraq war, the US had never directly occupied Arab land. However, US support for Israel and persistent interference in Middle East politics have portrayed the US as 'neo-colonialists'.<sup>118</sup> The socialist principle within Ba'thism, in particular, provides it with yet a further rationale to oppose the US and its strategic-economic policies. Thus for contemporary Arab nationalists in the region,

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<sup>116</sup> This was most notably demonstrated against Saddam Hussein and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The Arab coalition against Iraq has widely been interpreted as a reflection of Arab disunity; however, the Syrian regime has consistently justified it on the grounds of justice and solidarity with occupied Kuwait, and as a stance against a self-interested corruption of pan-Arabist principles. (Ghayth Armanazi, former Arab League Ambassador to London (1992-2000), and current Director of the Syrian Media Centre, interview with Author, London, 5 June 2007; Bashar Asad, interview with *Al-Anbaa*, 26 May 2003: <http://www.lebanonwire.com/0305/03052601ANBA.asp>)

<sup>117</sup> See Teodor Shanin, 'The Zionisms of Israel' in Halliday/Alavi (1988), 222-255

<sup>118</sup> See Chapters one and three for greater context and historical elaboration.

freedom, their core mantra, is not simply achieved through self-determination, but via the deeper notion of agency both in domestic and foreign affairs.

Given this analysis, filtering out the main objectives of Arab nationalism in praxis, it is more logical to position it closer to other *non-western* post-colonial nationalist movements, articulated for example in the works of Marcus Garvey and Franz Fanon,<sup>119</sup> which define anti-colonialism and revolution at the core of their ideology. Tibi recognises the anti-hegemonic character of Arab nationalism, but spends most of his work focusing on the intellectual writings of European nationalists and especially their Arab off-shoot, Sati al-Husri; considering the heavy cultural emphasis of Husri, and the liberal associations of the European nationalists, it is no wonder that Tibi makes numerous claims pertaining to the ‘death’ and obsolescence of Arab nationalism in the contemporary Middle East. Similarly, Dawisha does not look to the potency of anti-colonialism in Arab nationalist ideology, focusing rather on its failure to deliver Arab unity. Tibi, Dawisha and Ajami dismiss the role of Arab nationalism by judging it with criteria that have largely been peripheral to the Arab nationalist project for much of the last century, at least in practice.

By paying greater attention to Arab nationalism’s core principle of anti-colonialism and freedom from the influence of external hegemonic forces, it is possible to argue that the ideology has a continued relevance and influence in the current regional context, albeit having to negotiate its primacy with Islamism as a fellow anti-imperialist movement on the one hand, and statist nationalism as a negating influence on the other.

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<sup>119</sup> Elizabeth A. Hoppe, Tracy Nicholls (Eds), *Fanon and the Decolonization of Philosophy*: (Lexington 2010)



## 2.3 Affiliated Ideologies: Arab nationalism and Socialism

Although not central to all branches of Arab nationalism, the Ba’th party brought socialism into its doctrine as a domestic aim. Socialism presents a particular case of internal variations of ideological interpretation, unsurprisingly given its intellectual development in both western and non-western regions, and in hegemonic and anti-colonial contexts.<sup>120</sup> How then did the Ba’th party originally construe socialism within its own nationalist agenda? How does Ba’thist anti-colonialism and socialism support each other, which is given primacy? Furthermore, one of the recurring questions to arise in relation to Syrian foreign policy, particularly during the Cold War, is the extent to which the regime was under the influence of the Soviet Union; and thus, how far was Syria’s Ba’thism, with both its principles of anti-imperialism and domestic-socialism, merely an Arab extension and imitation of Soviet Communism? If there was much borrowing in terms of ideology, and dependence in terms of strategy and policy, might Syria’s ostensibly ideological position against the US in fact represent a case of Third World bandwagoning with the Soviet Union, and what impact, then, did its collapse have on Syrian foreign policy?<sup>121</sup>

### 2.3.1 Socialism at home and abroad

Historically, there have been important links between Syria and the USSR highlighting the close relations between a relatively weak state and a superpower. However, ideologically, Syrian socialism often, and deliberately, retained a clear distance from communism. From early on, socialist ideologues and activists made in-roads into Syrian politics, playing a key role in opposing the Syrian elites and politicians who emerged under the French mandate. Heading the socialist movement since the 1930s and setting up the Arab Socialist Party in 1945 was Akram Hawrani, an activist from Hama anxious to participate directly in political action;<sup>122</sup> in his earlier years he had founded his own Youth Party in opposition to the dominant National Bloc in Syrian politics. He was motivated by a clear domestic agenda against Syrian landowners and ‘feudalism’, and on several occasions was able to mobilise violent uprisings and mass demonstrations by the peasantry – an important factor in the politicisation of Syria’s rural communities and in encouraging a revolutionary style of politics among the grass-roots.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Festenstein, Kenny, *Political Ideologies*, 175-6

<sup>121</sup> See Charles Yost (1968) and Henry Brandon (1973) who argue that Syria’s position in the run up to the 1967 War, and intervention in Jordan, September 1970, was controlled by the Soviet Union, reiterating the view of the Nixon administration at the time (cited in Lawson., *Why Syria Goes to War*, 4-5).

<sup>122</sup> Hopwood, ‘*Syria*’, 82-83

<sup>123</sup> Seale, ‘*Struggle for Syria*’, 120

Such campaigns were hardly any different from the principles of the Communists in Syria, but rather than bring the two groups closer together, they provoked opposition and rivalry from the marginalised Communists. With Bitar and 'Aflaq's Ba'th party growing in popularity, and the gradual consolidation of their nationalist ideas into a more concrete ideology, their meeting and joining forces with Hawrani in December 1952 was a turning-point for Ba'thism and Syrian politics in general. With this newly forged ideological coalition between what Seale describes as, 'perhaps the most astute and the most principled men in Syrian public life'<sup>124</sup>, the most active and scathing anti-hegemonist forces in Syria had come together. The domestic grievances against inequality and corrupt ruling elites who had cooperated with the French, could easily be brought under the international context of resisting foreign domination. Within the ideological development of the Ba'th, it became clear that fighting the 'oppression' and inequality at home was a means of resisting imperialists abroad.

Secularism also appealed as a mutual feature between socialism and nationalism, albeit based on different rationales – according to the socialist perspective, religion alienates its adherents from themselves the more they give to God, in a similar fashion to capitalist extraction from the labourer, whereas for nationalism, religion is more a problem of misdirected loyalty that should be granted to the nation.

In terms of foreign policy, Syria became one of the strongest Cold War allies of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, brought together by mutual strategic interests no doubt, but also united further by shared socialist ideals and suspicion towards the US and its European partners. The USSR's strategic interests were clearly served by the alliance – its long-term goal had been to control the Bosphorus Straits and the Dardanelles in order to gain easy naval access to the regions beyond, plus to block European access through the Black Sea;<sup>125</sup> furthermore, the pro-western Baghdad Pact would bring NATO and the US' influence to the Soviet Union's front door. Providing support to emerging 'revolutionary' states in the Middle East was a logical step towards rebuilding a buffer zone between the USSR and the western sphere of influence, while at the same time aiding its ideological project.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 127

<sup>125</sup> Karsh., *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years*: Chatham House (1988), 2

Syria, in turn, mainly depended on the Soviet Union for defensive reasons. By 1955, Syria, already beset with internal political instability, was under increasing military threat from Israeli border raids, and pro-western encirclement by Iraq and Turkey. Encouraged by Syria's opposition to the Baghdad Pact, the Soviet Union stepped in to offer 'aid in any form whatsoever for the purpose of safeguarding Syria's independence and sovereignty'.<sup>126</sup> The 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars when the Soviet Union directly supported the Syrian (and wider Arab) cause against Israel and the US, and in particular the high degree of arms supplies and military assistance, stand out as clear examples of strong Syrian-Soviet relations during the Cold War.

However, despite this emphasis on their defensive-strategic relationship, it is important to note that Syrian dependence on the Soviet Union was also ideological. Syria's ideology had its own indigenous roots, and may have developed independent to the Soviet Union's anti-imperialist agenda, but during the Cold War, Syria's alliance with the Soviet Union allowed it to broaden its ideological framework from anti-hegemonism in the Middle East, to viewing itself as being part of a global struggle. There was not merely a bipolar international security structure in place during the Cold War, but importantly an international ideological structure; the Soviet Union led the faction that purported to stand against imperialism, the old Great powers and their colonial policies, and in that sense Syria willingly followed the Soviet model in strategic and diplomatic policies out of ideological commitment. And yet despite the connections, socialism was not a core principle in Syrian Arab nationalism, but could be more accurately described as an affiliated ideology.

### **2.3.2 Arab nationalist first, socialist second**

Given the above, the question remains – to what extent is socialism still an affiliated ideology, how strong is the coalition between Syrian Arab nationalism and socialism? While Ba'thist regimes embarked enthusiastically on socialist programmes after the revolution in 1963, it has had a notably lacklustre uptake in public opinion compared to the other pillars in the Ba'th party slogan – Arab unity and freedom from occupation. This can be attributed to two basic reasons.

The first is because effective socialism at home was impractical from early on due to the lack of industrialisation and levels of development needed for such a system. Although a

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<sup>126</sup> Molotov, Soviet Foreign Minister, to Syrian envoy to Moscow, Dr. Farid Al-Khani, 23 March 1955: BBC, NO. 556, 1 April 1955, cited in Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 234

crude measure, a basic comparison between doctrine and implementation will serve to elucidate the inherent problems with Syria's socialist project: A feature of socialism, as articulated by Henri Saint-Simon, is that it should be implemented *with* the emergence of new, socio-economic, industrialising systems, running with the tide of modernisation and historical progress,<sup>127</sup> in which innovators and producers – scientists, engineers, artists, industrialists<sup>128</sup> – take over the reins of society. Famously for Marx and Engels, this new triumphant class was the proletariat, the one social class able to bring about emancipation from the injustice of a capitalist system. While this was inevitable with historical development, they argued it still required agency and action on the part of the workers – in other words, forcing change through revolution in order to mirror the socio-economic transformations already taking place.<sup>129</sup>

The attempts by the Ba'th party before and after they came to power, to industrialise the country and urbanise the population through a rapid and sudden process of change – accompanied by eager ideological rhetoric designed to mobilise greater following among the people – certainly reflected the revolutionary nature of socialist systemisation advocated by its intellectuals. However, a *socialist* revolution required the prevalence and subsequent upheaval of a *capitalist system*, in which the proletariat represent the oppressed class struggling and overturning the ruling bourgeoisie – no doubt, social mobilisation depended on such emotive rhetoric and imagery.

Syria's predominantly agricultural economic system had not reached an industrial level conducive to such a revolution, thus promoting notions of a class struggle in order to drive a socialist agenda had little resonance with the Syrian masses; as the Soviet and Chinese models have demonstrated, structural economic changes can be forcibly implemented at great human cost, but despite possessing the necessary level of political centralisation Syria did not have the resources, stability or demographic capacity to complete such an overhaul. For sure, socialist policies certainly had an impact on notions such as equal access to services, education and welfare. Such changes should not be underestimated.

But overall, socialism at home, while not without some benefits, in reality translated into another function of state control. In fact, rather than furthering the ideological cause among

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<sup>127</sup> Claude-Henri Saint-Simon, 'On the Industrial System' in G. Ionescu (ed.), *The Political Thought of Saint-Simon*: OUP (1976), pp. 153-9

<sup>128</sup> Festenstein, Kenny, *Political Ideologies*, 176

<sup>129</sup> Marx, Engels, 'Communist Manifesto', in McLellan, D. (ed.), *Selected Writings*: OUP (1977)

the growing urban population, it is now often blamed for the country's economic stagnation and has instead become a focus of criticism against the regime. Indeed the limited success and appeal of socialism in Syria is now coming to light with increased pressure for liberalisation of the economy and education, not from the usual quarters of opposition but from economists, entrepreneurs and academics.

The second reason that socialism has not been popularised is that the domestic dynamics of a socialist ideological agenda have largely been overshadowed by its utility for Syria's international relations, especially during the Cold War. If, as was maintained by Syria's ideologues, an important impact of a capitalist system was the creation of an international market, used as a means of spreading capitalist values and practices across borders to other societies, then socialism could be used as a means of resisting such economic encroachment. Thus the main appeal of socialism at home as viewed by the nationalist elements in the Ba'th party and as presented to public, was as an expression of autonomy from external powers. The co-option of socialism as an ideological principle was, and remains, a utilitarian move: domestic production, self-sufficiency, state control of public services and employment were deemed as efficient ways of holding back covert foreign influence through investment, aid and trade. It also saved the Syrian state from the political binding and indebtedness to foreign (especially western) forces, which other Arab states had fallen prone to.

It should be remembered that the socialist roots in Ba'thist ideology were introduced initially through a pragmatic and logical alliance between Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party and was never in of itself at the heart of the Arab nationalist agenda. Whether adopted by the Ba'th, Nasser in Egypt, or other 'revolutionary' Arab states, socialism emerged as the natural ally indirectly through Arab neutralism in the Cold War. For Syria, this stance was adopted by the regime in 1950-1 before it was picked up by Nasser, reflecting, as Seale argues, their bitter experiences under the French mandate, 'resentment at the defeat in Palestine and the West's part in the creation of Israel',<sup>130</sup> and not necessarily a pro-Soviet position at that point.

Hawrani's socialist party had expressed its goals in identical fashion to the nationalists, in 1950 calling for a foreign policy 'free from all foreign orientation or influence',<sup>131</sup> and had united with the Ba'th against the military dictator Shishakli in 1952 when reports emerged

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<sup>130</sup> Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 101

<sup>131</sup> Arab Socialist Party Programme, 1950: cited in *Ibid.*

that Syria was about to join the western Middle East Defence Pact; moreover, in addition to these connections, and as 'Aflaq explained, the militarism of Hawrani's party, and his connections in the army, were deemed necessary for the Ba'th's step-up to 'the period of party warfare' that would be needed to precipitate revolution.<sup>132</sup>

That the main appeal of socialism for the Ba'th was its inherent anti-hegemonism and not its Marxist overtones, was made all the clearer by the Ba'th's rivalry with and hostility towards the Syrian Communist party and its more thorough, alternative socialist doctrine. 'Aflaq explained that initially, on first encountering Communists during his earlier travels as a student in Europe, he admired them because they were persecuted by the authorities, but nevertheless was 'suspicious of their dogmatic views'.<sup>133</sup> But by 1936, 'Aflaq and Bitar were completely disillusioned by the ideology when the Syrian Communists argued for a mere relaxation of the French mandate, but nevertheless agreed with its retention:

The Syrian Communist Party became nothing more than an executive tool of its French parent party and the French Government in general...Indeed its very existence became dependent on France's continued hold over Syria...it forgot its real enemies and concentrated instead on attacking Franco, Chiang Kai-Shek, Mussolini, and other enemies of France and Russia, while allying itself to political and social reaction at home.<sup>134</sup>

Furthermore, the Ba'th recognised that the Soviet Union was pursuing its own interests in the Middle East, and that 'the Arabs' should not be ideologically attached to the Soviet Union (as Arab Communists were), but should similarly pursue their own independent policies. In 1944, they published their manifesto, in which they highlighted the difference between ideological and political dependence and accepting strategic support and alliance from the USSR:

We are not against the Soviet Union as a state...The Arabs see no necessity to oppose a great state like the Soviet Union which, from its inception, has shown sympathy for countries fighting for their independence. Our aim is to establish friendly relations with the Soviet Union by means of official inter-governmental treaties and not through the medium of the local Communist Party....But the well-informed Arab cannot be Communist giving up Arabism. The two are mutually exclusive.<sup>135</sup>

It was a clear statement of independence, all the more significant given that it came at the same time that the Soviet Union was lending its first gesture of support to Syria over

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<sup>132</sup> Michel 'Aflaq, interview with P. Seale, Beirut, 13 Januray 1961; cited in Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 158

<sup>133</sup> S. Bitar and M. 'Aflaq in *al-Qawmiyya*, p. 13; cited in Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 150

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Bitar and 'Aflaq, *al-Ba'th wa'l hizb al-shuyu'i* (1944); cited in Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 152-3

Lebanon, a move that had strongly enthused other political parties in Syria, including the government, towards the superpower. Thus in 1954, in Syria's first open elections since independence, a wave of nationalist fervour brought a number of anti-western individuals to Parliament, including Khalid Baqdash, a Communist deputy. However, even the US, inclined to view any such developments as evidence of Soviet infiltration recognised that it was: 'more as an assertion of anti-Westernism with pro-Soviet overtones than as an expression of actual Communist sentiment.'<sup>136</sup>

This distancing from its loyalties to socialism and the USSR, despite the latter's power and influence, was at times demonstrated at the foreign policy level as well. As the above demonstrates, the appeal of a close alliance with the Soviet Union was based on its overt anti-imperialism and opposition towards Israel and the US, as well as the revolutionary model that it had set. A Syrian-Soviet alliance was entirely in keeping with Syria's interpretation of Arab nationalism as an anti-colonial doctrine. If at any point the USSR sought to encroach on Syrian independence and autonomous policy-making at the regional level, Syria notably distanced itself from the Soviets, especially under Hafez Asad's presidency.<sup>137</sup> He did not shirk from asserting Syrian independence when deemed necessary, most notably prior to the 1973 war with Israel.<sup>138</sup>

When the USSR went into decline, Arab nationalism certainly took a corollary hit. It aided Syrian disillusionment with the state of international affairs, particularly at a time when Syria was becoming increasingly isolated at both the regional and global level. Mohammed Ayoob argues that the end of the Cold War in fact weakened socialist-oriented nationalisms in the 'South', whether Arab, African, Asian or Latin American. The removal of the USSR as a counter-balance to western/northern intrusion 'signalled a major triumph for economic liberalism that provided ideological justification for penetrating weak and vulnerable Southern economies and polities', undermining the potency and value of both socialism and nationalism as forces of resistance and autonomy.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, it does appear to have been the overall impact on post-colonial nationalisms on a global level; the collapse of the Soviet Union certainly generated a period of doubt and a security impulse among most Middle Eastern states to bandwagon with the US in its 'unipolar moment', and it did cause the

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<sup>136</sup> Briefing Paper prepared in the Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs, 17.12.1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. XIII, 513.

<sup>137</sup> Author's telephone interview with Richard W. Murphy, London June 2009

<sup>138</sup> Karsh, 'The Soviet Union and Syria', 10-11 & 100

<sup>139</sup> M. Ayoob, 'Challenging Hegemony: Political Islam and the North-South Divide' *International Studies Review* (2007, Vol. 9, issue 4), 630-631

Syrian government to operate with greater caution within the international and regional setting.

However, as outlined above, Syria had not been dependent on the USSR for its sense of moral purpose against the US and the west in general, even if it was heavily dependent in terms of methods and resources. Its anti-hegemonic discourse and ideological rationale were not imports from the Cold War but were emergents of indigenous historical experiences, not just French occupation, but also regular interference and attempted control from its neighbours, and American intervention and support for Israel. Secondly, as was evident after the Camp David Agreements in 1978 and the ensuing Israeli-Egyptian truce, Syria often demonstrated that it was able to refocus its sense of ideological purpose from the collapse of an alliance. Without underestimating the disillusionment and set-back that the demise of the Soviet Union represented for the Syrians, it is possible to argue that it enabled Syria to forge a distinctly Arab nationalist role for itself in the region and vis-à-vis the US, while its demands and goals were no longer overshadowed by the politics of the Cold War. Syria was now able to take up the mantle as enemies of Israel and the US on its own ideological terms, bringing its own agenda to the fore. In sum, this demonstrates the typical relationship between affiliated ideologies, as outlined at the start; and thus a dilution of a socialist agenda in Syria should not be read as a contradiction of its core ideological goal.



## 2.4 Rival Ideologies: Arab Nationalism and Islamism

Having analysed the core and peripheral principles of Arab nationalism, and its affiliations with socialist ideology, we now finally look at its rival ideologies. Arab nationalism may have effectively become an anti-imperialist movement, but it does not enjoy a monopoly of that role in the region and has always needed to prove its credibility ahead of competing narratives of anti-hegemonism. In Syria, communism and socialism, as discussed in the previous section, challenged for the mantle particularly during the 1950s and 60s, while Islamism emerged as the main rival to Arab nationalism most notably during the 1970s and 80s.

### 2.4.1 Competing revisionists

The intensity of the rivalry between Arab nationalists and Islamists can be explained by their fundamental disagreement over religion and secularism; but it can also be attributed to their similarities, in terms of their transnationalism, hostility towards Zionism, appropriation of the Palestinian cause, as well as usage of cultural symbols as highlighted earlier. As Tibi, Itamar Rabinovich and Sylvia Haim note,<sup>140</sup> the two ideologies even share some common intellectual roots, since Arab nationalism was not solely founded upon western nationalist or socialist discourse.

Those roots can be traced to the religio-political movement that grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, alternately labelled as Islamic modernism, Islamic revivalism or pan-Islamism, to give a few examples, and carried forward by the likes of Jamal al-Din 'Al-Afghani', Muhammad Abduh (from Egypt) and Rashid Rida (born in Syria, educated in Egypt), these being some of the most prominent Islamists. They were heavily critical of the Ottoman rulers for abusing the status and purpose of the Islamic Caliphate through corruption and repression. The Ottoman rulers' divergence from traditional Islamic principles and their increased leaning towards the West, most notably after the Crimean War, were highlighted as the reasons for the Caliphate's clear decline and vulnerability.

Such views were not necessarily based on an aversion to modernity in of itself, indeed the corruption that was the focus of their criticism was also a major obstacle to economic and political progress; but rather their criticisms were directed at modernisation through

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<sup>140</sup> Rabinovich, I., *Syria under the Ba'th 1963-66: The Army-Party Symbiosis*: Israel Universities Press (1972), 1; Haim, S., *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology*: Berkeley (1964); Tibi, 'Arab Nationalism', 162.

*Westernisation* reflected most overtly through the reforms of the ‘Tanzimat’ period. It was not a structural ‘revolution’ that they were calling for –but rather for a spiritual reformation and the removal of western influence while the need to preserve the Caliphate itself was never in doubt. Notably, apart from Rida, they did not argue for an ‘Arabisation’ of the Caliphate; while their attacks on the Ottomans were viewed by some as being open to nationalist interpretation, they did not offer, indeed they often refuted, the nationalist alternative. They saw themselves as following a long tradition in Islamic history of revivalism (*tajdid*), treading the same path as classical Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, whom they regularly referred to, in holding the leaders and societies to account. They argued that progress and modernisation would be achieved by *returning* to authentic Islamic traditions, and not by discarding them as held by the secularists.

In this sense, Islamism refuted the causal relationship between modernisation and secularisation that was crystallised in the west, and similarly articulated by Arabist intellectuals. This claim to religious authenticity was an important component of early Islamist movements, and as is still the case, could be used to undermine other domestic political movements. It is on this basis that they justify their political activism to their wider societies where there has historically been a resistance to the integration of politics and religion, and where traditionalists who argue against such politicisation as a corruption of, and distraction from, true religious ideals, tend to (initially) have a greater following.

The next notable wave of Islamism came after the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate and the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, which was soon exported to other parts of the Middle East. The movement broadly took on many of the principles outlined above: the importance given to indigenous spiritual revival, the commitment to a resurgent Caliphate, the ‘comprehensiveness’ of religion – including its application to politics, and in particular, an even more vehement opposition towards the west and colonial imposition;<sup>141</sup> change was advocated through a combination of preaching, political activity, and later,

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<sup>141</sup> In 1935, Al-Banna, founder of the movement, outlined the ten basic pillars of the Brotherhood’s ‘covenant’, and high on the list was the goal of “liberation of the homeland from all ‘un-Islamic’ or foreign control, whether political, economic or ideological”. Their campaign to unite Egypt and the Sudan was articulated through a pan-Islamic vision to unite all Muslims as one Ummah (nation), echoing Arab nationalist calls for Arab unity. In 1938, Al-Banna directed the movement’s anti-colonial project onto a clear revolutionary path, using rhetoric indistinct from revolutionary nationalists and declaring: “No doubt the [1936 Anglo-Egyptian] Agreement is like a collar-band round Egypt’s neck. Is it possible that Egypt can free itself from this oppression? The language of power is the most effective language. If Egypt wants freedom and liberty, she should struggle in every possible manner to acquire power.” See Al-Banna; ‘*The Message of the fifth Conference*’ (1938).

‘physical struggle’, given that the colonial powers themselves had a military presence in the region.<sup>142</sup>

From this summary of Islamist thought and development, it is possible to delineate the areas in which Islamists and Arab nationalists clash, and where they compete and seek to outdo each other. Firstly, they differ on issues of identity and primary loyalty, the former holding to religion and the latter to autonomy of the Arab nation; both adhere to notions of transnational solidarity, but once again, the theoretical boundaries of this broad community are premised on alternative concepts; while Arab nationalism does not negate the role of religion as a tradition, it advocates secularism both as a fundamental and instrumental principle for the sake of representation, contra to the Islamists. They even differ on the crucial notion of anti-colonialism, in that the Arab nationalists oppose any external domination, while, in essence, the Islamists oppose domination from *un-Islamic* forces (although this does not rule out fellow Muslims).

However, in the context of post-war colonisation by European powers, which both movements were born into and which absorbed their priorities, Islamists and Arab nationalists were unified in their objectives, methods, and rhetoric. One might wonder why there was not a stronger alliance between the two, akin to that of the Arab nationalists and socialists; but a fear from both sides that the other would become a stronger force, and a perception among the Islamists that they had lost a great deal more since the fall of the Ottoman Empire than the nationalists – thus feeding a view that the nationalists were colluders – prevented any effective coalition and ensured that the rivalry persisted.

#### **2.4.2 Arab nationalists and Islamists, at home and abroad**

As intimated at the start, ideologies take on different levels of salience in different contexts - this is particularly the case with Arab nationalism, it being concerned with wider regional issues and not just the domestic situation. In extension to this, it is not just the relevance of the ideology itself that might alter between the international and domestic setting, but also its relationships with other ideologies; this can be seen with Arab nationalism’s links with Islamism.

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<sup>142</sup> Al-Banna, H., *Risaalat al-Ta’lim* (‘The Message of the Teachings’) (1935); also see Hopwood, ‘Syria’, 83

Clifford Geertz argues that ideologies are born in the throes of change, providing people with a means to reorient themselves to the social world in a period of disruption, and when the previous established order cannot be relied upon. Geertz attributes the social dissonance, within society and between it and the elites, to secularisation rather than to class conflict, and argues that ideology can be used to manage these problems.<sup>143</sup> Given that Ba’thism in Syria has led to the secularisation of politics, and partially of society, to what extent has it been able to manage the ‘social dissonance’ and the predictable alienation of the predominantly Sunni population from the minority Alawite regime?

On the domestic front, Islamism and Ba’thist Arab nationalism have not coexisted well together; by and large the Syrian regime has been successful in eliminating the Islamist challenge within the state, certainly it has been far more successful than some of its neighbours. A number of reasons, apart from sheer ruthlessness on the part of the regime’s security apparatus, can be identified. Keddie highlights the role of rapid economic development and oil income in augmenting the influence of Islamist movements within most nationalist states. Thus extensive urbanisation exacerbates the visible differential treatment between the poor and wealthy in the cities, while profits from oil help to speed up the process of urbanisation, and with it ‘income gaps, corruption, and visible wealth for the few’.

Such circumstances, accompanied by widespread popular discontent, make the political environment ripe for the rise of Islamism as a supposedly more equitable and frugal alternative to the status-quo. Moreover, Keddie argues, such governments are more likely to have experienced a heavy western impact and level of control, adding to their unpopularity; Iran, Egypt and Tunisia are cited as typical examples of this in the past.<sup>144</sup> But in Syria, economic development and urbanisation have been slower than in other states in the region (especially since Syria was already behind in this respect); thus the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood’s uprising in Hama in 1982 was successful not only due to the disproportionate military force that was unleashed on the small provincial city, but also due to the relative ease with which the activists could be isolated and contained within one part of the country. Keddie agrees that Syria does not fit the ‘socio-economic profile of a state that encourages the growth of Islamism’.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, unlike the examples given above,

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<sup>143</sup> Festenstein., Kenny., *Political Ideologies*, 11

<sup>144</sup> Nikkie R. Keddie, ‘*Ideology, Society and the State in Post-Colonial Muslim Societies*’, in Halliday and Alavi, ‘*State and Ideology*’, 17-18

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 25

Syria has held fast to its revisionist stance and maintains its criticism of, and distance from, the western powers. Both factors have helped to dissipate Islamist fervour in Syria.

However, with the relentless pursuit of socialist reforms since the ascendancy of the Ba'th in 1963, the process of urbanisation, while still not as extensive as in other parts of the Middle East, was still accelerated at a destabilising rate for the class and social structures in the existing urban centres; at least enough to stimulate increased opposition from Islamist activists and sympathisers, of which there were a growing number in the 60s and 70s. Islamism in Syria has largely been carried forward by the Muslim Brotherhood – set up in 1935 in Aleppo (where the headquarters remained until 1944) they were an extension of the Egyptian movement but lacking in their political and military experience, popularity and distinctiveness from the wider nationalist movement. In the 1950s, the Brotherhood in Syria put forward a concept of Islamic Socialism, to highlight the commonalities between the two on issues of equality, social welfare and combating poverty, briefly bringing them closer together with the Ba'th and Hawrani's Socialist Party; however by 1961 the term 'Socialism' was removed altogether from their rhetoric and replaced with a more overtly, albeit more general, programme that promoted similar objectives as before, but through the 'establishment of a virtuous polity which would carry out the rules and teachings of Islam'.<sup>146</sup> While Batatu describes their central slogans as being 'no more definite', popular but lacking in practical utility and clarity, they nevertheless represented a religious-oriented challenge to the secularism of the communists, socialists and the rising Ba'thists.<sup>147</sup>

Currently, the Brotherhood have no route to political power; yet an 'Islamic' public opinion continues to motivate the regime to safeguard its Arab nationalist credentials and restrain (although not necessarily abandon) cynical power-political campaigns in the region. When the Syrian regime intervened against the Palestinians in Lebanon, pinning back the Palestinian forces in 1976 and allowing Maronite Phalanges to exploit the lack of resistance and destroy the Tal az-Za'tar camp, it was heavily opposed by the Islamists at home and alienated much of Syrian opinion.<sup>148</sup> It was a loss of legitimacy acutely recognised by the regime, particularly as they witnessed the ensuing rise in domestic conflict between the Islamists and the Ba'thist regime in the 70s, coming to a head in the early 80s.

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<sup>146</sup> Article 6 of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Basic Rules of 1954, '*An-Nizam al-Asasi*' (Aleppo, 1954), pp. 8-9: cited in Batatu, Hanna., in Halliday and Alavi '*State and Ideology*', 112

<sup>147</sup> Umar Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, (Mizan Press, 1983), 88-96.

<sup>148</sup> Batatu, *Muslim Brethren*, in Halliday, Alavi, 112

Thus the Islamists, both at home and abroad, while subdued in the context of internal structures of power, continue to play an important role in propping up and revitalising the ideological purpose of Arab nationalism. Although Syrian control of Lebanese affairs has not ceased, the bloody intervention in Lebanon in 1976 was an anomaly that will not be repeated willingly. The Muslim Brotherhood, extinguished as a serious political challenger through sheer military force in Hama in 1982, without achieving their goals of revolution or redistribution of Alawite minority power, nevertheless succeeded in creating a distance between the ruling elite and the majority Sunni population of the country. True, not only did they fail to destabilise the regime, but in fact inadvertently strengthened Alawi unity within the army, and between the army and the leadership. But the atmosphere of crisis and rebellion which the brotherhood's campaign fostered was at the time critical and threatening for the regime.<sup>149</sup> It is not one that Hafez Asad, nor his successor, wished in any circumstances to battle through again. Doubts over legitimacy when a regime is so clearly unrepresentative and narrowly based in its tribal and religious appeal, is a persistent problem; hence even a latent, disarmed opposition needs attention, either via indirect accommodation or outright suppression.<sup>150</sup> Given these domestic circumstances, it has become logical for the regime to disproportionately promote the anti-imperialist principle, already central to the Ba'athist ideology, to its population.

If the domestic situation between the regime and its Islamist opponents appears to be a struggle for power more than anything else, their connections on the regional and international stage take on a greater ideological character. While Syria may not have won many friends with its polarising rhetoric and what might be viewed by some of its Arab counter-parts as moral posturing,<sup>151</sup> it certainly has ensured that ideology has remained on the Middle East's agenda and that Arab nationalism continues to be an anti-hegemonic reference point. Syria's neighbours, particularly the secular states, cannot step too far wide of the ideological benchmark set by the Syrians for fear of alienating their domestic populations and regional partners. Syria's stance has also had a crucial impact on the fortunes of regional Islamists. During the Cold War, Islamism was galvanised by the rivalry of secular nationalism; both pitted themselves against conservative regimes and the United States.<sup>152</sup> Since then, other Arab nationalist regimes have fallen by the wayside – Egypt, South Yemen, Libya, Iraq and the Palestinian Fatah movement have all demonstrated the

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 129-130

<sup>150</sup> See Hopwood, 'Syria', 100

<sup>151</sup> Slackman, Michael, 'Islamist' Rise Imperils Mideast's Order', *New York Times* (18 September 2006), cited in Ayoob (2007)

<sup>152</sup> Ayoob, 'Challenging Hegemony'

fallibility of Arab nationalism. Against this backdrop, Syria remains as the sole ‘vanguard’ of Arab nationalism, promulgating it as a political and social-value system, and resisting the US and Israel on that front. In this sense, Syria continues to contain, challenge as well as spur on its Islamist competitors.

Moreover, Syria’s ideological stance does not always put it on a collision course with Islamism; when Islamism is manifested as a regional resistance movement, defying Israel and the US in alignment with Syria’s own Arab nationalist agenda, it is in fact endorsed, co-opted and actively supported by the Syrian regime. The points of correlation that do not suffice at home (such as anti-hegemonism and a transnational regional loyalty) form a unified and representative front in the international context. Hizbullah and Hamas in their conflict with Israel, and Iran in its long-term antagonism towards the US, correspond entirely with the political mandate of Ba’thist ideology. Importantly, their activities are undertaken within the existing framework of the nation state,<sup>153</sup> and are not so revolutionary as to destabilise the entire structure of the Middle East region, inviting yet more external intervention under the pretext of democracy and freedom. In turn, this has tempered the conflict between Ba’thists and Islamists to a certain degree on the domestic front, especially when foreign policy forms such a key component of Syria’s news agenda and political activity. Once again, this apparent inconsistency or even contradiction in policy is given meaning and clarity when understood in the context of the flexibility and contingency of ideologies.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 633

## 2.5 Conclusion

To sum up the analysis of Syrian ideology, I have argued in this chapter that its practical manifestation, particularly in relation to the masses of Arab opinion, has been as an anti-colonial, anti-hegemonic project juxtaposed against oppositional forces, be that colonial powers, Israel or the US. I propose that, while Arab nationalism falls within a very basic rubric of nationalism, viewing it through a Eurocentric lens alongside other nationalist movements in Europe fails to take account of its particularities and differentiation in terms of its core and peripheral principles, its historical development and practical realisation. Those core principles are political autonomy from global hegemonic and external influence, and freedom from occupation or imperialism – be it military, economic, or political.

Crucially, in the event that a non-Arab actor supports these core principles, Syria has been seen to willingly lend its support and forge a strong alliance; this has been the case with Iran and Turkey in the past. And in the same way, if an Arab actor contravenes these principles, Syria has had no hesitation in opposing it. As the ideology's core goals are not based on culture, this need not be read as a contradiction of ideology. Indeed Arab unity, especially internally within the region, has evolved into a peripheral principle, except where it is needed to support the core principles. Socialism remains, but tentatively so, as an affiliated ideology – calls for greater economic liberalisation at home, an *infithah*, do not therefore amount to a usurpation of Syrian ideology.

This chapter has set out a framework for analysing ideologies within a foreign policy setting; it is hoped that by clarifying the definition of both ideology and Syria's Arab nationalism in this way, many of the questions about ideology and how it can be operationalised in this study will be answered. In particular, given that many of the realist assumptions about Syrian foreign policy rest on the view that Syria has frequently reneged on its ideological principles for the sake of power-political interests, this chapter is important in reasserting what those ideological principles are in the first place. This endeavour will have implications for the prevailing views on Syrian foreign policy, since an awareness of its ideological priorities and its practical goals reduces to some extent the level of apparent contradictions in its international relations.

Without doubt, there remain significant pitfalls with an ideational approach: firstly, if ideology is treated as a seemingly consolidated concept, albeit with historically embedded



socio-political roots, there is always the risk of reification and determinism;<sup>154</sup> secondly, by highlighting the strength of ideational motives and by framing the thesis as a counterargument to prevailing power-political explanations, the same criticisms of monocausality and absolutism levelled at realist interpretations might be similarly applied to an ‘ideological’ argument; and thirdly, in order to even study ideas, it is necessary to apply fairly generic analyses to diverse movements, which are not monolithic blocs but are represented by a variety of groups adhering to different aspirations and methodologies – such internal variations can be subtle or at times starkly contrasting. There is always a risk that these nuances and variations are lost for the purpose of analysis.

But at the same time, as Halliday and Alavi note, ‘[i]deologies are not *infinitely* flexible’,<sup>155</sup> and will retain core reference points that allow some degree of (cautious) generalisation. It is possible to avoid the above methodological traps through a consciousness that they are ever present, and through a recognition of: a) the differences between the core (more important) and peripheral (less important) principles in an ideology, which in turn indicate when a state is likely to be intransigent or flexible in adhering to ideology; b) the ever contingent nature of the implementation and salience of ideologies, dependent on different contexts, and c) the need to ground any conclusions about the role of ideology in a state’s foreign policy within a thorough empirical analysis. This last approach will be adopted throughout the ensuing chapters, enabling us to explore: how Syrian ideology was formulated and came to be implemented in the first place; the extent to which ideology continued to be relevant or not in later policies; the times when the ideology was adapted; and finally the times when it may have been discarded versus the times when it was strongly adhered to in US-Syrian relations.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 2: The above statement is made in comparative reference to the authors’ accurate analysis and avoidance of Islam’s ‘essentialist’ treatment in the literature as a ‘common social phenomenon, and a common set of beliefs, one which transcends different societies and distinct historical epochs’. This thesis will similarly avoid essentialising Syrian Arab nationalist ideology in such a manner.

<sup>155</sup> Halliday, Alavi, *State and Ideology*, 7

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Emergence of US-Syrian Relations: From Truman to Kennedy**

This chapter analyses the long-term causes and evolution of policies and stances elucidated in the latter chapters, and aims to provide a regional and post-colonial context to the thesis. It analyses policies and events, but also deliberately explores the perceptions and outlooks of the two sides. US-Syrian antipathy did not emerge from a negative reaction to a single policy – their positions were moulded in the first place by perceptions and evaluations that had developed over time, and incrementally from a series of encounters and activities from both sides in the region. The contribution of this chapter to the thesis overall is not merely to provide background context, but also to demonstrate the longevity of US-Syrian mistrust and to argue the point that latter US-Syrian relations cannot be understood without reference to the region's history in the twentieth century.

The following questions have guided the research and analysis for this chapter: What were the determinants of Syria's early foreign policy, and what were its aims? Similarly, what was the US' strategy in the Middle East, and what were its aims? What foreign policy did it adopt in relation to Syria in particular? Firstly, the chapter also seeks to analyse how their respective aims affected their policies towards each other, and through that to account for the emerging ambivalence and mistrust between Syria and the US; in answer to this question, the chapter explores the historical factors that heightened the possibility of mutual hostility, as well as the immediate policies and actions that confirmed it.

Possible avenues for conciliation are also addressed, as well as the reasons they ultimately failed. Secondly, the chapter seeks to highlight the distinctive aspects of US' policy towards Syria in comparison to other states in the region, and to provide an overview of the development and change in US-Syrian relations over this period; hence it follows US-Syrian relations through the inter-war period, and then through the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. And finally the chapter will investigate the nascent roots of ideology in Syrian foreign policy during its immediate post-colonial history.

Two potential problems with writing this chapter should be highlighted here. Firstly, since Syria's affairs were so closely bound to regional politics in this period, it is often difficult to address Syria separately. Indeed doing so would result in a loss of context and explanation for both Syrian and American motives and policies towards each other: both viewed the

region as a connected whole – Syria from the perspective of Arab nationalism and the US from the perspective of a global Cold War. Neither shared former colonial links, nor did economic resources act as a uniting factor; without direct bilateral relations to draw upon, particularly early on, a comprehensive approach to Arab opinion that incorporates the Syrian perspective has at times been necessary for the earlier period. I have, where possible, distilled Syria's position from the wider picture; at other times, Syria's specific standpoint is already clear from the documents.

Secondly, the chapter (as with the latter chapters) often relies on US (and in some case British) sources to extract Syrian opinion and perceptions; this is due to the lack of Syrian historical documentation, often because they were not recorded or have not survived, while those that have are generally not open to the public. Nevertheless, there is extensive documentation of direct Syrian communication, its policies, opinions and domestic situation, and transcripts of conversations recorded by US ambassadors and intelligence agencies.

### 3.1 The Early Syrian State and US Isolationism

This section will briefly analyse how the European mandates after the First World War laid the foundations for Syrian politics in the inter-war period, thereby producing a legacy of priorities, fears and aspirations that were built on by later political actors. The section will also assess the US' contribution to the process (often neglected because it appears to have been so limited), so as to provide a holistic account of US foreign policy towards Syria and the region by the end of the chapter.

At the end of the First World War, in line with the general principle of self-determination, President Woodrow Wilson indicated that the US was sympathetic towards Arab aspirations, stating as the twelfth of his 'Fourteen Points' that,

'The other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development'.<sup>156</sup>

However, while this apparently demonstrated strong American support for Arab sovereignty, the US made no attempt to thwart the major powers' quest for control over the Middle East; rather the mandate system enshrined in the US-inspired Covenant of the League of Nations acted as a green light. The US held a typically isolationist stance towards the Middle East and saw European control over the region to be in the best interests of all parties involved (for the time being).

US isolationism was temporarily postponed in May 1919 when it sent two prominent businessmen, Henry King and Charles Crane, on a fact-finding mission to Syria (then including Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon) and Iraq. By sending an academic and a businessman, not politicians, to carry out a report with no binding effect, the US was signalling its continued *political* indifference to the region so as to allay European fears and Arab expectations, without appearing wholly detached from world affairs. Ultimately, their report, outlining a unified Arab state and independence as the overwhelming wish of the people, was virtually ignored and made no contribution to British and French plans for the region; it was subsequently determined that 'Syria should go to France and Mesopotamia to Great Britain'.

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<sup>156</sup> Address by President Wilson delivered before a joint Congress on 8 January, 1918.

Though the US distanced itself from such projects, it was not vociferous in its objections to the French mandate over Syria in a meeting of the Council of Four just a few days before all mandates were authorised and fixed, despite the fact that of all the great powers France was the most unwelcome as resented by the Arabs.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, King and Crane had concluded in their report that the Syrian mandate would go to France, ‘frankly based, not on the primary desires of the people, but on the international need of preserving friendly relations between France and Great Britain.’<sup>158</sup>

Besides the ultimately ineffective King-Crane initiative, US interest in the Middle East during the inter-war period did not extend further than commercial investment in the region’s relatively untapped oil assets.<sup>159</sup> The Syrians, in turn, had little interest in the activities of the US. Syria had three major concerns in this time: maintaining continued resistance to the Great Powers in the Middle East; opposing the growing Zionist movement, particularly since the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and increased Jewish immigration into Palestine; and to resolve the internal factional strife that allowed the French to exploit their differences. In response to these concerns Arab nationalist sentiment reached even greater levels during the 1930s, exacerbated by the Palestinian uprising in 1936 and the enactment of yet more treaties to prolong informal mandates in the Arab states.<sup>160</sup> In Syria, this unrest was manifested at a more popular level and is well-documented in other works.<sup>161</sup>

This popular movement was given political impetus with the Arab League Pact, formally signed by Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen and Saudi Arabia on 22 March 1945. It prohibited any resort to force among member states, provided for the consultation

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<sup>157</sup> The Report of the King-Crane Commission, 28 August 1919.

<sup>158</sup> See Rogan in Fawcett, *International Relations*, 27.

<sup>159</sup> Acknowledged in retrospect by Henderson to the Secretary of State: ‘throughout the period between the two wars, there was no occasion for the United States to adopt a positive policy towards the Arabs’, memo, 29/8/1945, Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter referred to as *FRUS*), Vol. 8, p. 26

<sup>160</sup> Such as the Anglo-Iraqi Agreement in 1930, and the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement in 1936, established to maintain British presence in the region.

<sup>161</sup> Although the popular nature of the movement is contested in some works, such as J. Gelvin (1998) and Stephen Heydemann (1999) (see Charles Tripp, *Syria: The State and its Narratives (Review Article)*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, (2001), 37:2, 199-206), it should be noted that popular political participation was severely curtailed during the especially repressive French mandate (effectively occupation). Moreover, much of the dispute about the nature of popular Arab nationalism relates to the Arab revolt, rather than the anti-colonial sentiment during the inter-war period which permeated all strata of society to a far greater extent. There is some reference in the US documents to Syrian agitation, e.g. Engert to Washington, 9/4/1941, stated: ‘opposition to the French is on the increase among all classes’, *FRUS*, vol. 3, 1941, 696. The relative lack of documentation of Syrian politics in *FRUS* reflects in large degree American ambivalence about Syrian issues in the early years. However, widespread protests in rural and urban areas are extensively documented in the British Foreign Office Records. For an excellent exposition of these sources see Philip Houry, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, Tauris (1978), 167, and particularly chapter 7, which documents the grass-roots nature of Syrian resistance to French rule. See also Seale, *Struggle for Syria*; Rabinovich, *Army-Party Symbiosis*, 11.

and mutual assistance in the event of aggression against a member state, set up a Council and a Secretary General with headquarters in Cairo, and provided for cooperation between member states in other non-political fields. However, such was the lack of US political involvement in the region at the time that, in the words of the US Director of Office of the Near East, 'relations with the Arabs remained in general unaffected by these developments'.<sup>162</sup> Only when pressed for a view on Arab unity by the Saudis, the US stated:

The policy of the United States Government toward the Near Eastern nations has not formally been stated, but its general attitude is well known. This Government desires to see the independent countries of the Near East retain their freedom and strengthen their economic and social condition, and fully sympathises with the aspirations of other Near Eastern countries for complete liberty...<sup>163</sup>

Outwardly, then, the US adopted an early policy of sympathy and support for Arab unity, independence and greater prominence in world affairs.

In accordance with the policy outlined above, the US recognised Syria's struggle for independence against the French and that it would need financial assistance to overcome disorder and French obstructionism as the Syrians came closer to their goal. Anticipating conflict, Syria appealed to the US to provide policing equipment and training to enable them to maintain internal order. The US ministers based in the Middle East with their knowledge of the situation were keen to meet such requests. Thus, in early August 1945, Merriam, head of the US Near East Department, proposed 'in the interest of peace and security' the allocation of up to \$100,000,000 a year for several years, administered jointly by the State, War and Navy Departments, until the region became politically and strategically stabilised<sup>164</sup> – the plan, however, was rejected by Secretary of State George Marshall as unfeasible.<sup>165</sup>

Unable to provide the Arab states with the necessary financial backing for long-term stabilisation, a frustrated Merriam acknowledged that, 'our policies in these situations are not worth the paper they are written on because we have not prompt and effective means of carrying them out'. The notion of empty promises and lack of real help when needed was to

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<sup>162</sup> Memo: Henderson to Secretary of State, 29/8/1945, *FRUS*, 8:27. He added, '...except in so far as there was a crystallization of Arab opinion on the Palestine question, making it necessary for this Government to take such opinion increasingly into account in the formulation of our policy toward Palestine'

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, 28

<sup>164</sup> Prepared by the Chief of the Division of Near East Affairs (Merriam) and submitted by Henderson to President Truman early August 1945, *FRUS*, 8:48

<sup>165</sup> See footnote #27, 890.50/10-945 in *FRUS*, 1945, 8:44

be a recurring theme in nationalist rhetoric against the US in later years, ironically based on the same assessment Merriam had made of his own government.

Since the US could not or were not willing to provide any concrete support via finances or military help, it was left to the British to intervene with its forces when clashes between the Syrians and the French reached serious levels and threatened to destabilise neighbouring states. Nevertheless, the records show significant US concern over France's inflammatory policy, prompting strong condemnation and unequivocal instructions to the French that they should evacuate Syria without conditions.<sup>166</sup> Through these collective efforts, the UN in April 1946 finally terminated the French mandate, demanded their immediate withdrawal and declared Syria an independent state. Shukri Al-Quwatli, the head of the Syrian National Party, and the incumbent president under the French mandate since 1943, stayed on in the role as Syria entered independence. Thus it is fair to say that ultimately, the US played a late, but important, role in aiding Syrian independence; indeed, it is arguable that this constitutes the single most significant act of US assistance towards the Syrians throughout their modern relations.

Notwithstanding this positive intervention for Syrian independence, it should be noted that ending Europe's monopoly over the Middle East's resources was a key motive in the US policy to support Arab independence. US interests remained focused on the region's economic potential, despite the major political developments taking place in this period. Hence, even during the high-point of nationalist unrest during the Second World War, US correspondence and documentation on regional affairs were dominated by discussions over access to Saudi and Iraqi petroleum.<sup>167</sup>

Thus the US' major interaction with the Syrians in this formative era was to support their independence and to engage in active diplomacy to oust the French. It represented a positive beginning from which Syria and the US, on the face of it, had the opportunity to form more substantive and durable bilateral relations. However, it is also clear that US policy in the Middle East was focused on forging relations with oil-rich and economically strategic countries; the US largely remained passive to the region's major political developments, not

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<sup>166</sup> *FRUS* 1945, vol. 8, 1078

<sup>167</sup> See *FRUS*, 1944, Vol. 5, 'The Near East Region' with the vast majority of communication devoted to the issue of access to petroleum and maintaining US-Saudi relations for this purpose: For example, memo, Acting Secretary of State to Diplomatic Missions in the American Republics, 14/2/1944, 5:23; memo, Interdivisional Petroleum Committee to State Dept, 11/4/1944. 5:29; Cuthbertson to Secretary of State, 15/11/1944.

yet perceiving the implications they would have for the US' own global and ideological strategy after the Second World War. This demonstrates how crucial the next period would be in moulding the direction of future US-Arab relations.



### 3.2 The Rising US Role and Arab Disappointment

This section highlights the growing involvement of the US in the region following the Second World War and Syrian independence. It looks at the nascent Middle East strategy adopted by the US, and how it was viewed in the eyes of Arab states. It analyses why despite offering a fresh alternative to the imperial policies of the major powers, Arab and Syrian politicians maintained an ambivalent stance towards the new superpower. This section provides a more general and foundational view of the underlying conflict between Arab and American approaches to the region's issues – a more specific and focused analysis of American and Syrian interaction will follow later.

As the physical presence and political influence of the European colonial powers began to recede in the Middle East, the role and participation of the US in the region as a western, yet historically neutral, force became more significant and came under greater scrutiny. The significance of its role lay in its coinciding rise as a superpower, and through that its increased potential to act as a fair arbiter in the region's affairs, with the political leverage and military might needed to defend state sovereignty and individual rights. At first, there had been ample hope among Syria's Arab nationalist movements based on the US' minimal and relatively unsullied record of involvement in the region, as well as its public chastisement of European colonialism as an obstacle to democracy and freedom.<sup>168</sup> The Atlantic Charter, extolling the need for democracy and independence in all parts of the world, signed by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1941, had given further cause for optimism in the Arab World.<sup>169</sup>

Those with political aims and interests observed and judged the US on its policies and reactions to regional issues, hoping to see a departure from the old Anglo-French approach, rather than shunning them through a simple anti-western prejudice.<sup>170</sup> In a conference between US Ministers to the Middle East and Harry Truman shortly after he became President in 1945 after the death of Roosevelt, the US Minister to Syria and Lebanon George Wadsworth conveyed the situation in the Arab world and its importance to the US. He warned that the US needed to form a positive post-war policy prioritising Arab

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<sup>168</sup> For positive Arab responses, see Henderson to Vaughan, 10/11/1945, *FRUS*, 8:10. In private, the main reason cited for opposing Great Power presence in the Middle East was that it discriminated against American access to resources in the region (Memo from Henderson to Grew, 23/7/1945, *Ibid*, 19)

<sup>169</sup> Declaration of Atlantic Charter, *FRUS*, 14/8/1941, 3:367, plus 1942, 1:25

<sup>170</sup> Conference of Chiefs of Mission in the Near East with President Truman: reported by Henderson to Brigadier Vaughan, Military Aide to Truman, 10/11/1945, *FRUS*, 8:10

independence and unity as a primary objective, and not to view the region in a merely instrumentalist light. He argued:

[I]t seems vital to recognize that the whole Arab world is in ferment, that its peoples are on the threshold of a new renaissance, that each one of them wants forthrightly to run its own show, as the countries of the Western Hemisphere run theirs, without imperialistic interference, be it British or French, in their internal affairs. They say: "You have your Pan-American Union; we want our Arab Unity. Relations between your countries are based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality; that is the principle upon which we wish to base our relations with each other and with all other nations. We need foreign skills and capital and technical experts but not foreign dictation. We want treaties of friendship with all countries, treaties of alliance and special privilege with none. In our dealings with foreign governments and interests, we want to be free to apply freely the principle of equality of opportunity and the open door"....the United States can play a leading role. Our moral leadership is recognized today. The governments to which we are accredited want most of all to know whether we are going to implement that leadership, whether we are going to follow through after our great victory or leave the field, as we did at the end of the war, to others.<sup>171</sup>

His summary of Arab sentiment towards the US, based on his knowledge of the Arab nationalist movement in Syria, demonstrates how critical this immediate post-war period was for the future trajectory of East-West relations. Wadsworth predicted that if the US failed to give this support, the Arab states would turn to the Soviet Union and would 'be lost to our civilization'. And even so, he specifically pointed out that there did not need to be conflict with the Soviet Union in the region as their policies had thus far merely paralleled that of the US in acknowledging the independence of Arab states. Due to their existing close relations, the future alignment of Saudi Arabia and Egypt with the US was less in doubt than that of the Syrians, who had already begun to develop ties with the Soviet Union since their prompt recognition of Syrian independence. However, despite such fears, Syria's President Quwatli made clear in these initial stages that Syria, having no other formal relations with any other country since independence, wished to have its closest ties with the US, to sign its first treaty with the US and to use it as a model for such relations with other states.<sup>172</sup> With this positive approach and willingness to cooperate, and with sound intelligence readily offered by US legations on the ground, why then did relations between Syria and the US take such a negative turn?

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<sup>171</sup> George Wadsworth, US Minister to Syria-Lebanon, to President Truman on behalf of himself and Ministers to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem, Conference of Chiefs of Mission with the President, 10/11/1945, *FRUS*, 8:13-15

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, 16

In basic terms, one might simply point to actual US policies that turned Arab nationalist regimes such as Syria against them. However, most of these policies only became apparent during the mid-1950s when Britain's prolonged withdrawal from the Middle East was emphatically confirmed, and the US felt it both had a freer hand in the region, and needed to play a greater role to prevent Soviet encroachment.<sup>173</sup> By that period, doubt and suspicion of US interest in the region was already shifting to outright rejection, at both the executive and popular level. Thus in fact this suspicion had been accumulating from a much earlier stage. Before analysing the active policies adopted by the US towards Syria, we need to consider American strategy towards the Middle East as a whole, and how this was received and interpreted by the regional actors. Having had the opportunity to observe US motivations and approach to the region, four areas of dissatisfaction began to emerge among the Arabs.

*i. The Cold War comes first: US instrumentalisation of the Middle East*

Firstly, while the US sought to portray itself as a bastion of freedom and self-determination, as it had previously done after the First World War, many nationalists, both politicians and activists alike, began to see a different picture in which the Americans were certainly different, but not necessarily better, than their predecessors.<sup>174</sup> The French and the British had sought direct control over the region, but not only for access to resources – a sense of historical ownership and an attempt to hold onto their fading imperial identities also played a part, particularly with regards to the French in Syria, which had little to offer by way of resources; the Arabs, in turn, were able to position themselves in direct opposition to them, fighting against the absorption or annexation to another nation's empire and identity, and against accountability to outsiders. Thus it was a clear zero-sum conflict, fought over territory and resources, but rooted in issues of ideology and identity. That control of the Middle East was the central issue was in no doubt – the French and the British had multiple concerns in different parts of the world, but the nature of empire meant that those commitments were pursued with both the local and global contexts in mind; thus their colonies were conscious of their direct interest and involvement, albeit of a negative form.

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<sup>173</sup> Cases such as the Syrian-American crisis (elaborated further on), but also the US dispute with Iranian Prime Minister Mosadeq in 1953, early support for British presence in the Suez Canal zone, initiation of the Omega Policy to undermine Nasser, and pushing Jordan away from Pan-Arabism and the UAR in 1958: all put the US in a negative light and erased much of the good will that Arab states previously had towards them.

<sup>174</sup> Hoskins, the Acting Regional Planning Adviser Near East Office, stated to Byroade Asst Secretary of State for the Near East, 'It is hard for many Americans, unless they have recently visited certain parts of this area, to realize how general and how deep-seated is the distrust and in some cases hatred for the British and the French because of their past or present colonial policies and activities...the US is increasingly being put in the same imperialist category': Memo, 7/4/1952, *FRUS*, 9:204

The new situation was subtly different. While Roosevelt had claimed to be morally committed to the rights and independence of all states and regions for the sake of democracy, the arrival of Truman's administration saw the US move away from the rhetoric of idealism, announcing a more confrontational foreign policy via the Truman Doctrine. It specifically focused on its rivalry with the USSR as its main concern. Unsurprisingly in this context, the US did not see Syria in bilateral terms but as a factor within its wider global strategy. It was no longer the case that there were a multitude of disparate issues, which all had to be resolved individually by the colonial power involved. Now, an issue, a conflict, or a country, was only significant in that it had strategic implications for a single, all-encompassing priority, that being the emerging bipolar Cold War.

The Middle East – and especially Syria, with little historical connections with the US or Britain, and lacking in oil – was to witness this hierarchy of concerns first-hand; this generated the first aspect of Arab disappointment.<sup>175</sup> The US calculated that a stable and continuous energy supply would be central in reconstructing Europe and Japan in any power-struggle with the Soviet Union, and that control over those supplies would be a crucial battle-ground – it was *this* that prompted the US to take a far greater political interest in the region.<sup>176</sup> If we look forward to almost a decade after Syrian independence and the creation of Israel, US Secretary of State John Dulles acknowledged the difference in priorities between the Arabs and the Americans, stating that the Arabs are ‘more fearful of Zionism than of Communism, and they fear lest the United States become the backer of expansionist Zionism’; moreover, their differences with Britain, France and Israel meant the Arabs paid ‘little heed to the menace of Soviet Communism’.<sup>177</sup> This analysis, however, was to come later: under Truman, US policy towards the Middle East was dominated by its preoccupation with the Soviet Union and little else.

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<sup>175</sup> In 1944, when the US were formulating their post-War Middle East policy, the US Acting Secretary of State stated, ‘we are actively engaged in developing a firm post war foreign oil policy’ (14/2/1944, *FRUS*, p.23); later this priority was confirmed when the Petroleum Committee at the State Dept. Stated: ‘toward Iran, Iraq, and the Arabian peninsula, including Saudi Arabia proper...it is primarily with respect to these Middle East areas that United States policy must be formulated and implemented’, 11/4/1944, *ibid*, p. 29. These states gained greater importance after the onset of the Cold War, while Syria only became significant in US calculations after it showed signs of developing closer links with the Soviet Union.

<sup>176</sup> See Lesch, *Political Reassessment*, 1; and for more on US’ strategic shift away from isolation to adopting a global foreign policy, see M. Cox – ‘Whatever Happened to American Decline? International Relations and the New US Hegemony’ *New Political Economy*, 2001, 6:3

<sup>177</sup> Dulles speech ‘Six Major Policy Issues’ 1/6/1953 following Dulles’ trip to the Middle East, 11-29 May 1953: cited in David Lesch, *Syria and the United States – Eisenhower’s Cold War in the Middle East*, (Westview 1992), 33.

ii. *Different rules for different regions*

The second issue of contention was the US' disparate treatment of its western allies and so-called Middle Eastern allies. According to the National Security Council (NSC) paper 129/1 titled '*US objectives and policies with respect to the Arab state and Israel*', the US' goals were, 1) to reduce the instability threatening the West's interests; 2) to counter and diminish Soviet influence (and in turn to increase the West's influence); 3) to maintain accessibility of resources (chiefly oil) for the US and its allies in order to strengthen the 'free world'; 4) to help these countries resist Soviet 'aggression'; and 5) to strengthen the notion of sovereignty in the Middle East.<sup>178</sup> It is clear from this where US priorities lay.

The US perceived the above aims would be achieved through a minimum objective of stability (and later on, through the maximum objective of Arab-Israeli peace).<sup>179</sup> With the latter seeming such a distant prospect in the post-war period, and even more so after 1948, the only viable option apparently left for the US was the basic retention of stability. As in the traditional interpretation of the international system, stability for the US meant retaining the status-quo, and hence blocking the progress of 'leftist' movements that opposed the west and acted as channels for Soviet influence.

While it could be argued that the US adopted the same approach to all the regions it was involved with, including Europe, it should be noted that the Middle East states were not beneficiaries of the US' altruistic ideological agenda in the same way that Europe was.<sup>180</sup> Not *any* state's sovereignty was necessarily worth protecting, nor were the Middle East's resources to be safeguarded for its own uses, rather the US' concerns for democracy were reserved chiefly for its allies outside of the Middle East that were deemed to be ideologically sound. By comparison, Europe did not have the same material value (by way of resources) as the Middle East; that the US was so keen to prevent Soviet-Communist encroachment in the region testifies to the strength of America's ideological commitment to its allies in the west. In contrast, the Middle East was valuable for its strategic and material value, with little potential (in the view of the US) for ideological cooption.<sup>181</sup> What happened there domestically was of little concern to the US, except when it was feared that a state's internal

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<sup>178</sup> Cited in Lesch, *Syria and the US*, 17

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> See George Wadsworth's remarks to President Truman for Arab expectations and allusion to the West's differential treatment towards Europeans and Arabs 10/11/1945, *FRUS*, 8:13-15

<sup>181</sup> I.e. in terms of democratisation and individual liberties – see examples on aiding illegal seizures of political power in Syria, plus similar attempts in Iran.

politics was providing a gateway for Soviet penetration, and thereby enemy access to vital strategic resources.

The question that Middle Eastern states were asking was: what would *they* be gaining by cooperating with the US? For critical observers in the region, those seeking a change from the mandatory status quo, there was something fundamentally contradictory about America's Middle East policy. Certainly, it was strongly ideological; but surely, notions of the 'free world' referred not just to freedom at the inter-state level, but also domestically, to those individual liberties that constituted so-called democracies. And yet, as it appeared to actors in the Middle East – politicians, social movements, the public – this element was so crudely dispensed with in the US' approach to the region that it seemed an ideological ally in this part of the world was one that merely facilitated US intervention on American terms. There were US individuals who privately held the view that some form of an Arab union was unrealistic anyway, and was not likely to materialise in their lifetime<sup>182</sup> – in short, it was not a project worth pursuing.

With such a dim view of Arab aspirations, it is not surprising that the US did not exert more effort in sustaining a unified political regeneration of the region. Nor is it surprising, given the above, that it was difficult for the US to co-opt Middle Eastern states to its own liberal-democratic programme. Ultimately having failed to make a lasting impression in this way, the US resorted to a limited, short-term approach in which it offered material incentives to remove obstacles to western policies and interests in the region. Thus any relationships between the US and the Arab states were strategic and relatively superficial in that if economic assistance was terminated there would have been little remaining connection between them.

### *iii. Conflicting ideologies*

What impact did offering rewards alone have on state behaviour? If there was no inherent reason to align with the US except for material gain, and less immediately to avoid conflict with a superpower, and when such aid and pecuniary incentives dried up, so too did the channels of cooperation. This, in fact, raised the potential for instability in the regional system, and ironically it also locked the US into participation in an effort to control this outcome.

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<sup>182</sup> *FRUS* 1944

The historical adoption of alternative ideological agendas by Middle Eastern states were attempts, however unsuccessful, to counter the instability generated (albeit not solely) by the above situation, in order to foster some regional cohesion based on ideas and beliefs rather than on inconsistent and transitory advantages such as external grants. With nationalist-inclined regimes making such an assessment, two directly opposing programmes for stability in the region were produced: neutralist (or what the US saw as 'leftist') movements seeking internal agency; and the west, seeking to harness the region for the global struggle against Communism. Thus the third area of contention between the US and the regional (nationalist) actors was that the US not only had diverging priorities from them in relation to the Middle East, but also had different interpretations and solutions for the prevailing instability characterising the region. It was all the more galling for Arab nationalists that the US had previously voiced their support and enthusiasm for greater Arab unity and independence,<sup>183</sup> whereas now American leaders were singling it out as a threat.

There were, of course, actual policies that reflected US instrumentalisation of the region and American support for Israel (more of which below), which did precipitate clear, outward opposition and which will be analysed in the following sections. But it is inaccurate to define Middle Eastern opposition in this period as an instantaneous backlash to the US' growing support for Israel, or *purely* resistance to any form of interference in the region, as it can often appear when existing literature focuses on a particular event, rather than relations over time<sup>184</sup>; moreover, this accumulative opposition resulted from an holistic *evaluation* of US goals, interests and approach to the Middle East, such as that outlined above, and an assessment of the repercussions of US intervention. To view Arab opposition in just a reactionary light attaches suggestions of irrationality and emotiveness to the governments and the societies in the region in a way that belies the more considered and conscious positions of the Arab states in this period.

#### *iv. US support for Israel*

The above policies of the US which clashed with the Arabs' interests and aspirations were all rooted in America's security interests and ideological battle with the USSR. However,

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<sup>183</sup> Memo, Henderson to Secretary of State on the 'Attitude of the United States toward the Question of Arab Union', 29/8/1945, *FRUS*, 8:25-29

<sup>184</sup> For example, excellent works by Nigel Ashton: *Eisenhower, Macmillan, and the problem of Nasser: Anglo-American Relations and Arab Nationalism, 1955-59*, (Macmillan 1996), and B. Saunders: *The United States and Arab Nationalism – The Syrian Case, 1953-60*, (Praeger, 1996), which address the Syrian-American crisis or Suez Crisis, but offer only a cursory look at the wider background.

there was one other key area of contention between the US and the Arabs, which was not a part of the Cold War framework at this early stage. This was the US policy of supporting the establishment of an Israeli state. Wilson's principles of national self-determination and giving importance to popular will, and the Atlantic Charter that followed, gave the Arabs cause for optimism that the new hegemon would help them to achieve their aspirations which had been blocked for so many years by the European powers. The early American condemnation of imperialism and the European mandates had resonated deeply with the Arabs – they thus expected the US would similarly support their view that the Balfour declaration, and its promise to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine, was an extension of European colonialism and secret diplomacy, and therefore neither legitimate nor justified.

They were of course proved wrong – for not only did the US endorse Britain's agreement with the World Zionist Organisation, but it went further than Britain in support of a newly created state, and the unlimited immigration of Jewish people into Palestine. Under the mandate, Britain had attempted to manage a worsening situation between Palestinians and Jewish immigrants by limiting the number of immigrants to 30,000; moreover they wanted to avoid the displacement of the Palestinian population because of the problems it was likely to cause in the other mandated regions under British control. In contrast, the practicalities and consequences of Jewish immigration on the existing communities in Palestine did not come into American consideration. On 1 February 1944, the US Congress and Senate passed a joint motion stating:

The doors of Palestine shall be opened for free entry of Jews into the country, and there shall be full opportunity for colonization so that the Jewish people may ultimately reconstitute Palestine as a free and democratic Jewish Commonwealth.<sup>185</sup>

This, then, was not a new policy to emerge after the onset of the Cold War, but had been gaining momentum over the inter-war period. Thus in the same period when he was championing Arab rights in the Atlantic Charter, Roosevelt was passionately advocating the need for a Jewish state in the region. This was in part attributable to his own Jewish ancestry, and a personal emotional affinity that he felt with the Jews. But he was not alone among America's political elite. Many of them felt deep sympathy for the plight of the Jews since the holocaust and sought to make amends on behalf of the west. Moreover domestic political considerations were at play even in the early years of America's engagement with

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<sup>185</sup> House Resolution 418 & 419, 1/2/1944, outlined in memo from Berle to Secretary of State 28/1/1944, *FRUS*, 5:1944. It contradicted the 30,000 limit imposed by the British mandate and, in the view of Arabs, the US' pledge to support Arab rights and unity in the Atlantic Charter.



the Middle East, and a large Jewish-American community and public opinion in favour of an Israeli state meant Arab aspirations on this issue were sidelined. While the Arab-American differences outlined above emerged with the start of the Cold War, the source of this friction was external to, and preceded, the Cold War.

However, with Israel's unilateral declaration of statehood in 1947, followed by UN ratification and the formal separation of Palestine in 1948, America's pro-Israel policy became more public in the Middle East. It coincided with the announcement of the Truman doctrine – both of these aspects of American policy in the region were seen to undermine America's previous policies opposing external intervention and colonialism, and exacerbated Arab grievances and mistrust against the US.

In summary of this section, Syria's political actors made the following evaluations early on: 1) the core foreign policy goals of the US with respect to the Middle East were different from those pursued by its regional actors: for the regional actors, ridding their countries of external domination (including Israel) and independence were paramount, for the US this aspect was only instrumental to their economic interests and the blocking of Soviet encroachment; 2) the US sought to protect the region's resources in order to supply and strengthen western democratic governments against Communism and authoritarianism, and yet their ensuing intervention in the Middle East (including Syria) often helped to install or uphold non-democratic regimes against the 'popular' will; 3) for the US, the post-war status quo without Soviet encroachment represented stability, whereas for the regional actors the mandate system seemed merely to have been replaced by the establishment of Israel and *indirect* Western control – thus the status-quo still had to be challenged; 4) the US supported the establishment and security of Israel: whereas the US had disapproved of the perpetuation of the mandate system in the Middle East, this latest example of colonisation as the Arabs saw it, the '*Nakbah*', had US endorsement.

### 3.3 Truman's Policies and Syrian Scepticism

A number of US projects and initiatives that were formulated to achieve the NSC aims outlined earlier, which reflected the three areas of friction and nonalignment analysed above, can be identified in the post-independence period as having provoked dissatisfaction and early tensions between the US and Syria, these being: suspected US support of a dictatorial coup, the Point IV Programme, the US' preferential treatment towards Israel, and the Middle East Command (MEC).

#### *i. Sponsoring regime change*

Having previously shown little interest in Syria, it being of less economic value than its neighbours, the US became aware of the Soviet Union paying it more attention. In 1949, the US made its first intervention in Syria's fractious political scene to help General Husni al-Za'im overthrow the Al-Quwatli regime on 30 March. The US acknowledged that he was a 'Banana Republic dictator type',<sup>186</sup> but despite this contradiction of outward US rhetoric for the pursuit of democracy, what mattered here was that the new dictator was recognised as someone who would work with the west and help them implement schemes for peace with Israel. Moreover, it was hoped he might bring stability to Syrian factionalism (even if that meant through repression) and that in turn he would be able to reduce Soviet influence in the country. And indeed, Za'im delivered to a large extent on these expectations: he signed an armistice with Israel and facilitated western economic interests by approving concessions for TAPLINE, which transported ARAMCO oil from Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean. He improved relations with Turkey, a NATO member and a vital ally of the US in the strategic interface between east and west, at a time when Turkey was experiencing a widening rift with its Middle Eastern neighbours. He unilaterally steered Syria away from a pan-Arab agenda towards western preferences, imprisoning Ba'athists and stating:

The Syrian Republic wants neither Greater Syria nor Fertile Crescent. We will pit our forces against these two projects of foreign inspiration...we have assurances that Great Britain is for the status quo and that France and the United States would never accept a change in the situation.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Cited in Lesch, *Syria and the US*, 18 – quoted in Douglas Little, 'Cold War and Covert action: the United States and Syria, 1945-1958', *The Middle East Journal*, vol.44, no. 1 (Winter 1990), 55-56

<sup>187</sup><sup>187</sup> Za'im in an interview with *Journal d'Egypte* (Cairo), 27/4/1949, cited in Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 56-57

Finally he demonstrated himself as a useful ally in the Cold War by clamping down on Communist factions in Syria and showing willingness to accept US military assistance in a clear signal that Syria was ready to throw its lot in with the US. Unfortunately for the US, Za'im was overthrown within four and a half months; thus Truman's short-term link with Syria, hinging as it was on one individual, evaporated before it had really begun. The US' historical tendency to operate through individuals in the Middle East in exclusion of other parties was a key reason why it was unable to build a stable bilateral relationship with Syria throughout the post-independence period, being so closely associated with the discredited regime after a change in government.

*ii. Point IV assistance*

Two military coups followed Za'im's assassination: Sami al-Hinnawi lasted only a short period before General Adib ash-Shishakli ousted him in a coup in late 1949. The US attempted to start afresh with the Shishakli regime, once again using the tool of material incentives to bring it in line with western strategy and interests in the region. The Truman administration had introduced the 'Point IV Programme' as a way of propping up economically developed countries with financial and military assistance to prevent them from succumbing to Soviet influence; the logic here was not dissimilar to that of the Marshall Plan and the subsequent European Reconstruction Programme introduced two years earlier. The ERP was gradually beginning to bear fruit in Europe, not least in fostering a far greater level of not just economic but also political cooperation between old allies and former enemies alike; it seemed reasonable to the US that such a programme might have provided a significant route towards stability in the Middle East, as well as engender a deeper loyalty to the US. Certainly it reflected a long-term commitment on the part of the US, as opposed to ad-hoc and transitory handouts given to temporary dictators.

The programme of assistance was offered to the Syrian regime, but after ongoing negotiations, and stalling on the part of the Syrians, the opportunity for cooperation on this front was eventually rejected. Indeed, as the US often reflected afterwards, Syria was ultimately the only Arab state to 'flatly refuse' US assistance through Point IV, and further economic aid offered for construction and development.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Briefing paper prepared in the Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs, 17/12/1954, *FRUS*, 1955-57, 8:514

Why then, was the programme scuppered before it could make any meaningful progress? Firstly, it is highly questionable whether the Americans' analogy between the ERP and a potential Middle East economic programme was an accurate one.<sup>189</sup> Shishakli refused assistance on the basis that it appeared to merely aid planning rather than actual implementation of reconstruction projects.

Secondly, the lack of trust on the Syrian side was too great. This mistrust was built on the recent history of US involvement in Syria's coups, but particularly connected to US sympathy for Israel. The Syrians had the following ongoing grievances with regards to Israel, which they believed the US had done nothing to rectify or was directly responsible for: 1) Israel's refusal to comply with recent UN resolutions;<sup>190</sup> 2) the Palestinian refugee crisis, lack of any UN action on the issue, and continued US pressure on Arab states to settle refugees without any plans for repatriation;<sup>191</sup> 3) the US and UN's failure to push back Israel's borders;<sup>192</sup> 4) the disregard of Arab demands for the internationalisation of Jerusalem;<sup>193</sup> 5) no action over the continued incursions by the Israelis over the Israeli-Syrian border;<sup>194</sup> 6) US endorsement of continued Jewish immigration into Israel;<sup>195</sup> and 7) the fact that the Germans had been instructed to pay reparations to Israel for Jewish losses in the War, while nearly one million displaced Palestinians would not receive reparations from Israel.<sup>196</sup>

Despite a military dictatorship being in place, this did not mean that Syrian politics and society had been stabilised and that the incumbent regime was free from the threat of public or factional revolutions – the fear of public opinion, political threats and Shishakli's personal opposition towards Israel,<sup>197</sup> obstructed the development of any positive and substantial relations between Syria and the US. At a time when US hegemony was in no doubt, and

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<sup>189</sup> See A. Enterline and M. Grieg, 'Against All Odds? The History of Imposed Democracy and the Future of Iraq and Afghanistan' in *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2008) 4:321-247, who argue that the forging of a democratic system through such economic programmes is by no means assured, and that exporting same strategies based on historical analogies is flawed.

<sup>190</sup> E.g. 18 May 1951 UN Security Council Resolution: Cannon to State Dept., *FRUS*, 9:875

<sup>191</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, 15/1/1953, *FRUS*, 9:337

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, 338

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>194</sup> US Minister to Syria, Cannon to State Dept., 5/5/1952, *FRUS*, 9:924

<sup>195</sup> Dept of State Position Paper on Syria, 5/5/1953, *FRUS*, 9:1207

<sup>196</sup> Cannon to State Dept., 3/3/1952, *FRUS*, 9:901; the suggestion tabled by the Syrians was promptly refused by US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, 12/3/1952, *Ibid*, 909.

<sup>197</sup> 'We find no recent easing [of] Arab Israel tension in Syria where primary barrier to moderation is unresponsiveness of public opinion toward reasonable arguments', Cannon to State Dept, 11/3/1952, *FRUS*, 9: 908; '[Shishakli] is determined to maintain and support Arab claims against Israel. Programs and policies conceived without recognition of these factors will find no ready acceptance in Syria': Cannon to State Dept., 25/9/1952, *ibid*, 1011

Syrian domestic politics was still fragile, sacrificing greater security through US backing was highly significant and indicative of Syria's anti-imperialist priorities.

### *iii. The Middle East Command*

If the Point IV Programme made little progress, the Middle East Command (MEC) was doomed to fail from the start. It was proposed by the US as a way of prizing Egypt away from British control and to allow the strategic routes of the Suez Canal to be utilised for the Western economy on an equal basis. The US sought to replace the existing (and constraining) Anglo-Egyptian Treaties, and presented the MEC favourably to the Arabs as a way of ending old colonial ties, whereas privately it had little to do with promoting Arab independence. The MEC would have a British Supreme Commander, links to NATO and staff from the US, France, Turkey, Egypt, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The MEC headquarters was to be based in Egypt, and in the event of war, Egypt was required to guarantee the MEC access to all facilities.

Ultimately the proposal was counter-productive, prompting the Egyptians to both abrogate the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and to reject the MEC in October 1951.<sup>198</sup> Syria, although not specifically solicited to join the MEC, supported and encouraged Egyptian opposition on the basis that the Head of the MEC was to be of a non-Arab nationality, that western troops based on Arab soil during peace-time was too reminiscent of imperialism, and lastly it seemed the MEC was being forced on the region.<sup>199</sup> The greatest impact of the MEC on US-Syrian relations was to aggravate Syrian public opinion against the west and make it even more difficult for any Syrian leader to cooperate with the US, as will be analysed in more detail in the next section.

What Syria had needed after independence was sustained financial help with development and reconstruction, support for its goal of carving out an independent niche for itself in regional politics, and chiefly it sought arms for security. The US certainly encouraged the Syrians to apply for assistance through global financial institutions, but these all took the form of loans or the reimbursement of cash rather than the provision of funds and equipment up front; moreover, any direct US aid tended to be offered on the condition of progress in the

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<sup>198</sup> The Syrian press in October 1951 attacked Egypt for even considering acceptance of the MEC, putting this down to Egyptian self-interest and desire to monopolise the Arab League. Thus Egyptian opposition of the West was influenced by negative opinion in the region in general: Telegram, Damascus to Foreign Office, 25/10/1951, British National Archives (hereafter referred to as *UKNA*) FO371/91850

<sup>199</sup> Memo, Hoskins to Byroade, 25/7/1952, *FRUS*, 1952-4, 9: 261

Arab-Israeli conflict, whether agreeing peace with Israel or the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Syria. Thus in Syria's view, US aid was too complicated a pursuit;<sup>200</sup> in the place of the anticipated help they perceived a single-minded, anti-Communist agenda, disconcertingly detached from the priorities and interests of the Arabs. Meanwhile the US contradicted its formally-held position of support towards Arab unity, perceiving it as an extension of Communism and Soviet influence.

To exacerbate matters, it showed no signs of pressurising Israel to compromise on any Arab demands. US policies and attitudes combined reflected, in the eyes of the Syrians, a complete misreading of the region's politics and a failure to appreciate the scars of its very recent history. It not only made the Syrians less willing to cooperate, it instilled in them a mistrust of what further problems and loss of independence such cooperation could lead to in the future. With only minimal and unsubstantial interaction, the Truman administration had shifted the Syrian position from one of candidness and optimism towards the US, to one of aloofness and suspicion.

### **3.3.1 Domestic politics and the role of popular movements 1946 – 1954**

The previous sections looked at Syria's interaction with the US at the leadership level. Prior to independence, the presence of the French prevented any meaningful Syrian leadership in foreign affairs, while post-independence, the fledgling state was dominated by a series of coups and counter-coups, bringing in highly autocratic military leaders. Thus in terms of the actual decision-making, it has been appropriate to focus on the elite level. However, the development of politics on the ground among competing popular movements needs to be explored in more detail, particularly since they began to have an increasing influence on top-level decision-making. Thus, before addressing US-Syrian relations during the Eisenhower administration, this section will look at the radicalisation of popular politics against both Israel and the US during the transitional period under Truman and the early years of his successor, and how that spread in a bottom-up process. It will also highlight the increasing connections between Syria and the Soviet Union resulting from the strong ideological trajectory of Syrian domestic politics.

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<sup>200</sup> Syria resented the conditions it was asked to meet – such as solvency before the granting of loans from the International Bank – which Israel apparently were not: Damascus to FO, 8/1/1951, *UKNA* FO371/91863; moreover, despite numerous offers of aid by the US, Syria constantly turned to alternative sources of aid, such as Britain and France, from whom the Syrians tried to buy second-hand weapons (see *UKNA* File FO371/104216 January-February 1953). These efforts reflect the extent to which Syria refused to be indebted to the US for arms or finance, conscious of the political conditions it would have to fulfil.

*i. The impact of Syria's state-formation*

There are a number of distinct trends in Syria's state formation that need to be highlighted by way of explanation. Firstly, the Middle East state system was a new formation beset by internal strife and colonial intervention, preventing an immense structural change from having any chance of becoming a settled and functioning characteristic of the region. By the Second World War, the Arab states were still fighting to attain a status nominally granted to them at the end of the First World War. By the time Syria had gained independence in 1946 the momentum for positive transition and political change had been lost, and much of the existing style of factionalism and entanglement of foreign affairs in domestic politics, had become entrenched in the political structure. This was more evident in Syria than in Egypt, for example, where the state's new boundaries had created a greater upheaval in identity and political administration.

It was in this context in the search for security that foreign support was constantly sought by disputing factions to shore up their own power; the interference of outside forces in Syrian affairs, whether they were French, British, Iraqi, Jordanian, or Egyptian, meant that Syria could not challenge them alone with their limited resources and military, and needed the added threat of a more powerful state to have any credibility.<sup>201</sup> Foreign involvement in Syrian affairs also meant that Arab nationalist ideology that drew its relevance from the interference of external forces could remain paramount not just for foreign policy but also for the state's domestic politics.

Another important issue that needs to be acknowledged with regards to Syria's domestic politics, which in turn affected its standing on the international stage and subsequent bilateral relations with external powers, was the lack of ownership of foreign affairs (which up until independence remained in the hands of the French). There was, therefore, a lack of Syrian representation in discussions between the west and the Middle East, particularly at times of crisis. The US was able to strike up a significant level of diplomatic rapport with both Egypt and Iraq, even though both were also inclined towards a pan-Arab agenda in the

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<sup>201</sup> Shishakli often argued to the US that he needed military aid because all Syria's existing resources were used to combat Communist forces at home; rebels responsible for the overthrow of Shishakli received help from Iraq, most probably with indirect British endorsement (see Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 137-9); the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan maintained its claims to Syria as part of a unified 'Fertile Crescent'; while the arrival of Nasser on the nationalist scene saw increased attempts from Egypt to dictate Syrian affairs.

post-war period; this was something it failed to achieve with Syria.<sup>202</sup> It is possible to strike a connection here between the more revolutionary, 'radical' direction of the Syrian nationalist movement (compared to the tempered nationalism found elsewhere) and its lack of voice or representation at a higher and more consequential level of politics, where the opportunity (or necessity) for dialogue and pragmatic considerations can often dilute an unwavering ideological stance that is more easily maintained in an isolated, domestic context.

Another factor playing into this was, of course, the nature of the mandatory division between Britain and France; clearly those countries historically attached to Britain also inherited more substantial attention and contact with the US as a result of the close Anglo-American relationship. The old French mandates, however, were disadvantaged by overbearing French control,<sup>203</sup> as well as poorer links between France and the US: consequently, Syria had much less representation on the international stage, at ambassadorial level and at the UN, than its neighbours. This contributed to the US' perceptions that Syria had less influence on collective Arab politics than its better established and politically cohesive peers.

## *ii. Public opinion*

Both the entanglement of foreign and domestic issues, and the alienation of ideological parties from the domestic and international setting, combined to form a particularly 'radical', revolutionary brand of domestic politics in Syria. The wider the gap felt between the masses and the political elite, be they foreign occupiers, wealthy notables or military autocrats, the more likely the masses were to create an alternative political platform that was more inclusive, more idealistic and certainly more critical towards their regime and external powers. Thus, while this chapter focuses on the decisions and diplomacy of the elite, their stand-points - particularly moments of intransigence and opposition - cannot be understood without recognising the popular pressure influencing their policies. US correspondence with other regimes in the region demonstrate the extent to which public animosity towards Israel and the west played a greater role in Syrian decision-making than in other states; US legates in Syria, their British or French counterparts and the Syrian officials themselves, regularly

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<sup>202</sup> US correspondence with Middle Eastern regimes in the period between 1943 and 1947 on a variety of regional issues including the Arab-Israeli conflict, US diplomatic missions to the area and possibilities for a future Arab union shows the lack of Syrian representation in these discussions, and a disproportionate reliance by the US on Saudi, Egyptian and Iraqi consultation. See *FRUS* 'The Near East Region', Volumes 5:1944; 8:1945,

<sup>203</sup> See correspondence condemning French heavy-handedness and refusal to allow complete Syrian independence: Henderson to Acting Secretary of State, 23/5/1945, *FRUS*, 8:1093 (*passim* 1034 – 1218).



alluded to this constraint in any dealings with the west, manifested in Syria's unique lack of cooperation or participation in a number of US-led defence or economic programmes.

This public influence was demonstrated when the US had relatively easy relations with the Syrian officials in power in the late 1940s,<sup>204</sup> and had not yet been directly exposed to the level of anti-western, and more recently, specific anti-American, public sentiment. Initially, in the autumn of 1950, the unsettled nature of the Syrian state was seen by the US to present a good opportunity to turn away from 'reactionary regimes' such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, by creating economic links with the Syrians to increase US leverage in the region and promote reform.<sup>205</sup> With their greater experience of the region, the British advised caution in such a plan, arguing that 'the intense nationalistic and anti-imperialist sentiment in Syria could constitute a barrier'.<sup>206</sup> This was echoed by Ma'ruf Al-Dawalibi the Syrian Minister of National Economy, when he expressed to James Keeley, the US Minister in Syria:

Syrian public opinion hold US partly responsible for plight [of] refugees and believes that if true to its oft-expressed ideals, US should take lead in enforcing UN decisions, particularly, as Arab states were stopped by US-UN action in defending inalienable rights of Palestine Arabs. As long as Arab refugees are denied these rights...Syrian opinion will remain exacerbated and any Syrian statesman who seeks cooperation with US in political or economic sphere will be plagued by criticism and opposition because of US connection with Palestine tragedy.<sup>207</sup>

And indeed when Keeley spoke to Syrian journalists and the press, he found that while they were not averse to closer economic connections between Syria and the US, there remained a 'deep-seated chagrin' at the US' previous support of Israel to the disadvantage of the Arabs, while the fear of further Israeli aggression made 'almost everyone suspicious of our professed good intentions'.<sup>208</sup> Moreover, earlier in the year, Mustafa Siba'i of the Islamic Socialist Front,<sup>209</sup> 'an authentic mouthpiece of the Syrian masses' according to Seale, and highlighted by the US as an important anti-western group, declared:

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<sup>204</sup> Memo from Dept of State Executive Secretary, Battle to Bundy, Central Files, 783.00/9-3061, 30/9/1961, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 7:269-70: asserted that Shishakli as harbouring 'alleged pro-Westernism'.

<sup>205</sup> Discussions between the US Dept of State and the British Foreign Office, 21/9/1950, *FRUS*, 5:209

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> Telegram from J. Keeley, Minister in Syria, to US Secretary of State, 24/2/1950, *FRUS*, 5:1205.

Despite this admission, the Syrian Minister expressed hopes for cooperation in the economic sphere, to which the US Minister noted that it was 'in marked contrast to indifference and even hostility that Syria had heretofore shown toward our disposition to be helpful', *ibid*, 1206

<sup>208</sup> Keeley, to Secretary of State, 19/7/1950, *FRUS*, 5:1213

<sup>209</sup> This was the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood exported from Egypt. See Chapter 2 for discussion on Syrian Islamists' overlap with socialism.

We are resolved to turn towards the eastern camp if the Democracies do not give us justice...To those that say the eastern camp is our enemy we would answer: when has the western camp been our friend?...we will bind ourselves to Russia were she the very devil.<sup>210</sup>

The Syrians' view that the US did not fully appreciate their grievances would have been further exacerbated if American views on Syria's concerns over Palestine were known – for there was a perception, held even by those in the Near East Office that Syria had no business in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and should prioritise their own economic matters.<sup>211</sup>

On top of these obstacles, the US was well aware that Syria had not only stalled over Point IV assistance, but chose not to request aid through the US Export-Import Bank or loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) as all of its neighbours had done.<sup>212</sup> It was stated:

Of all the Arab states, Syria...is the most wholeheartedly devoted to a neutralist policy with strong anti-Western overtones...The Syrians unlike any other Arabs feel themselves free of need to look to the West for any kind of support or help (they are economically self-sufficient).<sup>213</sup>

This tendency of the Syrians to seek economic independence and self-sufficiency was unnerving for the US: it prevented the US from gaining political leverage in the short-term, and in the long-term contributed to the view that the Syrians were singularly difficult to cooperate with.<sup>214</sup>

Nevertheless, the US proceeded to tour the Arab states in an attempt to co-opt support from the emerging neutralist regimes. George McGhee, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs, who had initially touted the project and took part in the tour, was at last able to witness this public opposition during his visit to Syria. It was by this stage being expressed vocally and regularly against the major powers, Israel, and

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<sup>210</sup> Statement in March 1950, quoted by Pierre Rondot, 'Les États Unis devant l'Orient d'aujourd'hui', *Orient*, no.2, April 1957, pp. 47, cited in Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 102

<sup>211</sup> For example, George McGhee stated: 'Syria should devote itself to economic development and other matters more important to its national development than raking over the coals of the Palestine conflagration', McGhee to US Minister in Syria, Cavendish W. Cannon, 14/11/1950, *FRUS*, 5:1222

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> Briefing paper prepared in the Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs, 17/12/1954, *FRUS*, 1955-57, 8:513

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

increasingly the US, on the streets of Damascus and in the press.<sup>215</sup> Before the official visit, a coalition of opposition groups made up of the Ba'th, the Arab Socialist Party and the Islamic Socialist Front declared their policy of strict neutrality towards both the US and the Soviet Union; students petitioned and rallied against the British and American arrivals; and workers sent letters of protest to western ministers in Syria.<sup>216</sup> The Ba'th, emerging as a strong and popular nationalist force by this stage,<sup>217</sup> followed up with a manifesto in January 1951, stating:

The Arab nation fighting to free itself from Anglo-French-American imperialism...warns the Arab League against making any gesture of adhesion to one or other of the two blocs; it holds to a genuine neutralism which will prevent Western imperialism making the Fatherland a strategic base and exploiting its oil resources for military ends...<sup>218</sup>

During and after the representatives' trip in February and March, there were attempted bombings at the British consulate in Aleppo and at the US Minister's residence in Damascus.<sup>219</sup> However, such public protests did not deter the west from pursuing their Middle East Defence strategy, although they felt vindicated in their choice to leave Syria out of their plans for the MEC. Alongside their leaders' opposition to the proposals, the Syrian public marched in their thousands after Friday prayers to protest against the US and the British, and to pledge their support for the Egyptians in the face of 'imperialist plots'.<sup>220</sup>

Meanwhile, political groups used allegations of supporting the west to bring down their rivals and cause significant political changes at home – the following were all deposed consecutively for cooperating with west: the conservative Quwatli in 1946, the dictators Za'im and Hinnawi in 1949, and two successive Prime Ministers serving under General Shishakli – Nazim Al-Qudsi and Hasan al Hakim<sup>221</sup> - for not rejecting and condemning the MEC in public in 1951. Thus it was not just the case that domestic politics influenced foreign policy, but foreign affairs similarly had a major impact on domestic issues.

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<sup>215</sup> See UKNA File FO371/115972 for cuttings from Syrian press containing extreme denunciation of the US and Britain.

<sup>216</sup> Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 103-105, quoting from newspapers Al-Misri (22/1/1951) and Ash-Sha'b (13/3/1951)

<sup>217</sup> For details on the rise of the Ba'th as an ideological and political group, see chapter 2.

<sup>218</sup> Ba'th Manifesto, 24/1/ 1951: See Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 103

<sup>219</sup> Montague-Pollock, Damascus, to Eden, 20/12/1951, UKNA FO371/98940

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 112

<sup>221</sup> Hakim's support for the MEC and public/political opposition, outlined in telegrams, Damascus to Foreign Office, 5-7/11/1951, UKNA FO371/91850

This became more evident when General Shishakli was overthrown in 1954; the free elections that followed demonstrated the extent to which anti-western, ideological parties had worked underground to strengthen their support base and become consolidated, political organisations. They now came to the fore, with the Syrian public voting overwhelmingly in favour of neutralist parties and independents. The Ba'th had made the greatest progress among the parties – having secured only one seat in the Syrian Chamber in the 1949 elections, they now emerged as the second largest party close behind the conservative People's Party, whose numbers had halved since the last election. Some of the notable individuals to be elected were Salah al-Din Bitar, co-founder of the Ba'th; Ma'ruf al-Dawalibi, a conservative in the People's Party but also leading member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood; Khalid al-'Azm, a strong proponent of neutralism and standing as an independent; and Khalid Baqdash, leader of the Communist Party. The results did not so much reflect the rise of the left in Syria, but a popular response to perceived US pressure on the Syrian government.<sup>222</sup> This important distinction was often overlooked in the west; thus the day after the elections on 25 October, the Cairo daily Al-Ahram announced 'Syria rejects all pacts with the West', whereas the American press reported the elections as a victory for Communism in the Arab world.<sup>223</sup>

### *iii. Syrian-Soviet relations*

Nevertheless, while the Syrians were not about to adopt the Soviet Union's ideology, they did welcome relations with a superpower that at least recognised Arab priorities in the region, and at best shared their goals of combating pro-Israeli, western interference.

There are three key factors to highlight with respect to the Syrian-Soviet connection: first, there was a convergence in regional goals between the Soviet Union and Syria, as both sought to remove western control. While the Soviet Union had been one of the foremost supporters of the establishment of Israel, it had gradually begun to backtrack from this position by the early 1950s, seeing the strong pro-western course that Israel had adopted. After the fall of Hasan Al-Hakim's Government in October 1951, the new Prime Minister Ma'ruf Al-Dawalibi – anti-western and anti-Hashemite – learned from his predecessors' downfall and advocated a firmer neutralist stance. He was one of the first in the Arab world

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<sup>222</sup> For example, during the elections it was widely reported that the US was pressurising the government to, among other things, accept Point IV aid, to exclude Communists from the elections, and to build a Coca-Cola plant in Syria. Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 185

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

to call for a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and the purchase of arms from the east instead of the west;<sup>224</sup> in response, the American press labelled him as ‘the most outspoken anti-American Arab leader’.<sup>225</sup>

Secondly, it is important to note that the USSR and Syria were not in complete alignment to the extent that Syria was a Soviet satellite in the region; indeed, there were significant disagreements between the two. It was a negative ideological alliance in that their opposition towards the US and the west, and not a self-standing unity, defined their alignment;<sup>226</sup> this subtlety was often lost on the Americans, who regularly conflated nationalism with Communism.

Thirdly, increased Soviet-Syrian ties served to perpetuate the existing suspicion and coldness between the US and Syria – for the Americans, this gave further currency to their formative view that the Syrians were an unruly and intransigent, obstructionist force in the region, one whose opinions were unreliable and need not be taken into strong consideration; whereas for the Syrians, American reactions to their links with the USSR confirmed their impression of the US as a self-interested party in the region bent on monopolising all power and allegiances for itself. The instability of Syrian domestic politics in this time had greatly contributed to its marginalisation in US considerations for the region, viewed as incapable of dictating its own affairs. While to a certain extent this had been the case, in large part due to French occupation, the internal developments and subsequent radicalisation of Syrian Arab nationalism had in fact a major influence on regional politics and provided continued impetus to anti-westernism in the region. As Seale argues, ‘to have an Arab policy at that time was to have a policy regarding Syria’.<sup>227</sup>

The US did not fully appreciate this, while it is arguable that the Soviet Union did; thus instead of recognising that Soviet strategic calculations were crucially at play here, efficiently taking advantage of Syria’s regional concerns, the US viewed the Syrians as being wilfully inclined towards Communism. The US did not compete with the Soviet

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<sup>224</sup> As Minister of Economy, he had already concluded an economic agreement with the Russians and had begun talks on a treaty on friendship and commerce: Telegram, Foreign Office to Damascus, 13/5/1950, NA FO371/82794

<sup>225</sup> Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 115

<sup>226</sup> See Chapter 2, ‘*Ba’thism and Socialism*’, for deeper analysis of the ideological and tactical relationship between Syria and the Soviet Union; also note caution in Syrian press of Soviet interference in Syria’s ‘private affairs under the guise of defending us against Western intervention’: in ‘Jeel Jadid’ and Alif Ba, sent from Damascus to FO, 27/11/1951, UKNA FO371/91850

<sup>227</sup> Avi Shlaim, Yazid Sayigh, *The Cold War and the Middle East*, (Oxford 1997),.51

Union for Syria's alliance, as it did over Israel and Egypt; and by the time the Americans recognised Syria's importance and sought to challenge Soviet influence, it was too late.

From this account of radicalisation and popularisation of ideological politics and foreign policy in Syria, it is possible to understand the context of US policies towards Syria and the region under President Eisenhower. The next section looks at the Baghdad Pact, the Suez Crisis, and the Syrian-American crisis of 1957, which served to bring US-Syrian relations to a new nadir.

### 3.4. US-Syrian Relations under Eisenhower

Despite the above developments in Syria's internal politics and affiliation with the Soviet Union, there was renewed optimism in both Syria and the Arab world immediately after Eisenhower came to power in January 1953;<sup>228</sup> It was generally considered that both the President and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles sought to operate foreign policy in the Middle East on a more 'even-handed basis between Israel and the Arabs'.<sup>229</sup>

However, despite the fact that Arab opinion towards the US was at such a critical juncture, and given the rising tension between the US and the Soviet Union, there remained as before a 'hierarchy of threats' for the Eisenhower administration, with Communism at the top, followed by the threat of anti-western nationalism, and finally imperialism and colonialism.<sup>230</sup> Thus, in spite of Eisenhower's more comprehensive appreciation for the importance of the Middle East compared to Truman, Syrian disappointments were not about to be rectified now. Moreover, for all the rhetoric that the US sympathised with Arab nationalist aspirations, the US' key alliances being forged in the region were with those conservative, 'reactionary' regimes such as Saudi Arabia, for whom Arab nationalism represented a threat both to their self-interests as dynastic rulers and their religious opposition towards Communist influence in the region.<sup>231</sup>

The strategic importance of the region has already been outlined; but in the above context, and after the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, the Korean War and the fall of Chiang Kai-Shek in China, the Middle East had become indispensable for the US. By the 1950s, the potential of this importance was fully realised not just for the US but for the entire western economy, upon which western Europe based its post-war reconstruction. British Government figures for early 1956 showed that Europe imported roughly 93 million tons of crude oil, 90 per cent of which came from the Middle East; demand for crude oil products

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<sup>228</sup> General Shishakli to Dulles, memo of conversation in US Embassy in Syria, 16/5/1953, *FRUS*, 9:57-8, stating: 'As a result of the US elections last November there was great hope in Syria and the Arab world that there would be a new US policy to the Near East.'

<sup>229</sup> Reflecting his view that the US had a greater moral responsibility towards the rest of the world, and not just itself, Dulles stated in April 1956, 'The United States is, I suppose, the only country in the world which has foreign policies which are not primarily designed for its own aggrandizement.' Comments to foreign-service personnel, 21/4/56, John Foster Dulles Papers, Box 106, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton: cited in Ashton, *Eisenhower*, 6.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>231</sup> Saudi Arabia's world view was based on a division between Dar-al Harb (territory of war) and Dar-al Islam, which included monotheistic religions. Hence an alliance with 'Christian' US was economically, politically and religiously encouraged, while the influence of Communism (manifested, in the eyes of the Saudis, through socialism) was to be resisted.

had increased by 17.4 per cent in just two years between 1954 and 1956.<sup>232</sup> The favoured means of protecting such economic interests was by providing military assistance to allies in the region – this doubled up as straight-forward defence against any potential Soviet military threat from the East, but also as a political gesture that these countries were indebted to the US and under their influence.<sup>233</sup>

### 3.4.1 The Baghdad Pact and the Suez crisis

Thus in this context, and despite the evident opposition to such projects, the prospect of a pro-western regional defence plan resurfaced again in 1953 – no longer as the MEC, but via the Baghdad Pact (later renamed as CENTO), drawing help from South Asia and Turkey (the so-called ‘Northern Tier’) to protect the Middle East, for British and American interests. The US was well aware that such a pact might provoke greater anti-westernism, but it took a calculated gamble in promoting it, arguing that if it did not, it would make little positive difference to the relations between the US and neutralist states.<sup>234</sup> Following the revolution in Egypt, its nationalist leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, rejected the Baghdad Pact, creating unprecedented tensions between the Egyptians and the British. Eventually, in 1956, Britain provoked matters by refusing to fund the building of the Aswan Dam, to which Nasser responded by blocking British access to the Suez Canal, a cornerstone of British Middle Eastern strategy. The ensuing Suez Crisis involving Britain, France, Israel, Egypt, Syria and the two superpowers, had a marked impact for Arab-west relations.

Syria’s role in all this was significant: Seale argues that Syria had effectively held the ‘casting vote’ among the Arab states on the future of the Pact. February 1955 saw the demise of the conservatives in the Syrian Chamber due to their equivocation on the issue, and the forming of a new and more emphatically anti-western government<sup>235</sup> - once it had expressed its opposition to the Baghdad Pact, other states followed suit, reassuring Egypt that it would not be isolated in its stand-off against the British.<sup>236</sup> Moreover, the Syrians continued to support the Egyptians against the west by sending their own troops into the conflict of 1956.

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<sup>232</sup> Ashton, *Eisenhower*, 37

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>234</sup> Special Intelligence Estimate, 14/12/1956, *FRUS*, 1955-7, 12:402

<sup>235</sup> The Ba’th secured their first Government post on this occasion; a year later, key posts of Foreign Affairs and Economics were given to Ba’thist, reflecting the continued rise of the Ba’th.

<sup>236</sup> Interview: Salah Salim, Egyptian spokesman, to Seale, 12/4/1960: Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 212



The crisis also confirmed the growing convergence of Soviet and Syrian Arab nationalist interests in the region. Thus the Soviet Union entered the fray in the last few months of the crisis, declaring they would send troops in if the British and French did not withdraw. It was most probably an empty threat and did little to sway the conflict, but it certainly raised Soviet currency with the nationalists. Furthermore, after years of rejected requests for arms from the US, the Syrians now had a willing supplier in the Soviet Union, receiving £100 million worth of arms from the Soviet Union between 1954 and 1957.<sup>237</sup> Nasser's successful resistance against the west persuaded the Soviet Union of the advantages in providing the Arabs with the proper means to continue such resistance in the future, especially with the US keenly pursuing defence pacts with these same states. Hence the lines of Cold War alliances were drawn up in the Middle East, and the fearful prognostics of Communist take-overs appeared, in the eyes of the US, dangerously imminent in Syria.<sup>238</sup>

### 3.4.2 The Syrian-American crisis

It was in this regional context of western set-backs, emboldened Arab nationalism and Soviet intervention, that the Syrian-American crisis developed in 1957. Syria's Ba'thist-Communist coalition during the Suez Crisis was interpreted by the US as a Communist domination of Syrian politics.<sup>239</sup> The US was further alarmed at the speed with which the Russians had been able to secure a Syrian alliance, and the damage it was capable of inflicting on western interests in the region. It was no longer viable to take a passive approach to the internal affairs of Arab states: while in the past the US had clandestinely supported individuals who were already in search for power, the US would now be willing to actively instigate domestic and regional resistance for the overthrow of a 'dangerous' regime. There had already been an aborted attempt to overthrow the Syrian government in the run-up to Suez, masterminded by Britain and Iraq;<sup>240</sup> the US had been privy to those plans but did not actively participate – they now sought to carry out the task more efficiently, using their newly-established dominance of the region.

Fearing imminent Soviet intervention in the region, the new US strategy was publicly declared with the Eisenhower Doctrine in March 1957. In it, Eisenhower demanded alignment against 'the East', not just the Soviet Union but its Arab allies as well; he

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<sup>237</sup> Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 234

<sup>238</sup> Special Intelligence Estimate, prepared by the CIA, Intelligence agencies of State Dept., the Army, Navy, the Air Force and the Joint Staff: 29/11/1956, *FRUS*, 1955-57, 12:358

<sup>239</sup> Allen. W. Dulles, Director of Central Intelligence in NSC meeting, 3/3/1955, *FRUS*, 12:27

<sup>240</sup> Progress Report on US Objectives and Policies with respect to the Near East: 22/12/1956, *FRUS*, 1955-57, 12:428; Also see Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 263-282

stipulated that the US would strengthen the internal security of any state threatened by 'International Communism' and would provide military assistance against Communist aggression. The doctrine imposed a bipolar context onto local conflicts, recasting them as extensions of the Cold War.

Using the doctrine as a mandate to intervene, James Richards, the new Special Assistant for Middle East Affairs, and then Loy Henderson, Deputy Under-Secretary of State, toured the region in March and August 1957 respectively to enlist support from regional states, and in turn to isolate Syria from its neighbours.<sup>241</sup> Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq were all consulted by the US and gave their endorsement to the Eisenhower Doctrine; Neither US representative visited or made any contact with Syria throughout the ensuing crisis.

Given the growing isolation it was finding itself in, the increased frequency of Israeli attacks on the border,<sup>242</sup> and given the progress of Soviet-Syrian relations in the previous two years, it was not surprising that at this time, Syria's Defence Minister Khalid al-'Azm travelled to the Soviet Union to sign a technical and economic agreement with the Soviet Union. However, this was viewed by the US as the sign that Syria had become a Soviet satellite. Within a week, on the 12<sup>th</sup> August, the Syrians announced the discovery of a US plot to overthrow the regime. There appeared to be ample evidence that the US had been behind the plot, enlisting the help of former dictator Shishakli and attempting to recruit a number of Syrian officers to the plan. In response, and in a show of defiance, the Syrian government expelled three US diplomats – Robert Malloy, Howard Stone and Francis Jetton – and purged a number of Syrian officers; this, in turn, was reciprocated by the US with the expulsion of the Syrian Ambassador, Farid Zayn-al Din, and his staff from Washington.

The crisis did not dissipate with the above dismissals. Syria, seeking to close ranks after the scare, replaced its former Chief of Staff with the Soviet sympathiser 'Afif al-Bizri. For the US, this change signalled the inevitable Communist take-over that they had feared.<sup>243</sup> It sent arms to those of its allies neighbouring Syria, while Henderson briefed Turkish, Iraqi and Jordanian leaders on a plan of action. He urged them to ensure that any armed action undertaken should be defensible at the UN, and is reported to have stated that: '[Any] action

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<sup>241</sup> Telegram, Washington to FO, 21/8/1957, UKNA FO371/128224

<sup>242</sup> See UKNA File FO371/121732, on issue of Israeli attacks in the demilitarised zone and Syrian complaints to the UN security Council 1955-1956

<sup>243</sup> A view echoed by the British in its correspondence with Washington, Telegram from FO, 20/8/1957, UKNA FO371/128224

must be one hundred per cent successful when you decide on it. It is our belief that if there is to be action it must be efficient.’<sup>244</sup> The US had traditionally relied on Turkey to put pressure on Damascus; they now instructed it to send its troops to the Turkish-Syrian border. The Soviet Union responded by sending two warships to Syria’s aid.

However, Turkey was not able to muster enough regional support for its actions, given its close association with the west and unhealed rifts with its Arab neighbours since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. Other conservative Arab states were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with US belligerence, and were facing mounting domestic criticism at a time of renewed nationalism. Thus Saudi Arabia intervened at this crucial stage, mediating between the Americans and Arab states to moderate their positions towards Syria.

Due to the strength of nationalist fervour coming off the back of the Suez Crisis key Arab states eventually refused to act against the Syrians,<sup>245</sup> and the US project failed. Nevertheless, the incident had a significant and long-term impact on US-Syrian relations. It marked the beginning of a profound hostility towards the US and feeling of ‘imperialist victimisation’ on Syria’s part.<sup>246</sup> Years of suspicion and anti-westernism were confirmed and justified by the crisis; having previously marginalised Syria in regional affairs, the one time the US had recognised Syria’s importance had led to a violation of its sovereignty. That the Syrians had initially held a degree of optimism for prospects under the Eisenhower administration made the Syrians all the more mistrustful of future American governments.

For the US, the fear of Soviet penetration had led them to instigate direct regime change, regardless of how counter-productive it might prove in the end. It demonstrated a reactionary approach, and a disregard for Syria’s strategic value except in relation to the Cold War. This limited analysis of Syria’s importance was demonstrated by the US’ satisfaction at the eventual outcome of the crisis, which ironically saw Nasser taking over from Saudi Arabia as mediator, thereby drawing Syria away from the USSR and inclining it closer towards Egyptian pan-Arabism.<sup>247</sup> In the US’ view, the fact that Syria was now far

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<sup>244</sup> Notes of Rafiq ‘Arif, Iraqi Chief of Staff, taken at the meeting with Henderson, read out in the trial of Ahmad Baban at an Iraqi military court: BBC, no. 682, 17/10/1958, cited in Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 299.

<sup>245</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 30-2-57, 8/10/1957, *FRUS*, 1955-57, 12:599

<sup>246</sup> Lesch, *Syria and the US*,:141

<sup>247</sup> Staff Study Prepared in the Department of State, 30/10/1957, *FRUS*, 1955-57, 12:636-637: The US adopted a far more lenient approach towards Egypt than Syria; US policy was to ‘keep the present regime in Syria off balance and in the position of being an abnormality in the area’. Also see NSC Meeting, 6/2/1958, *FRUS*, 1958-60, 12: 39-40; Telegram from Embassy in Egypt to State Dept., 11/12/1957, *FRUS*, 744-746

more hostile towards them, severely hindering future relations, was an unfortunate, but not a calamitous (and certainly not the worst) turn of events. Once again, the US demonstrated its willingness to sponsor a military coup in order to replace an anti-western government in the Middle East. Furthermore, despite acquiring a far greater knowledge of the region and ability to assess the situation accurately, the Eisenhower administration had demonstrated the same propensity to translate all regional issues through a Cold War lens. Syria, for its part, had demonstrated a high degree of autonomy in its actions *vis-à-vis* the US amidst widespread anti-westernism among the public.

Western-sponsored regional intervention in its domestic politics had created turmoil and a break-down of Syria's political cohesion. Fearing further destabilisation in the aftermath of the Syrian-American crisis, Syria saw little other option than to enter into a union with Egypt in 1958, its stronger Arab nationalist ally. Syria saw out the remainder of the Eisenhower administration and the arrival of President Kennedy as a bystander in the United Arab Republic (UAR). It was to be a short-lived union, before Syria made its re-entry as an independent and key regional actor in the volatile decade to follow.

### 3.5 Syria and the US After the UAR: From Ally to Enemy

Nasser might have demonstrated his independence from the west, but supporting him as leader of the Arab nationalist movement actually served American interests, as the US depended on him as a restraining force over the more 'radicalised' and unpredictable nationalists in Syria. Despite initial reservations, the US viewed the UAR as a positive feature on the Middle East scene, not bringing stability through Arab unity, as Syria had hoped, but through the subservience of a radical force to one whose revisionism was limited and compatible with the status quo. US dismay at the Syrian rebellion against the UAR in 1961 reflected this position.<sup>248</sup> The following highlights their negative assessment of the Syrians and how that played into their policy-making:

It should be emphasized...that the Syrians have traditionally been [a] highly individualistic and undisciplined people and that Syrian political movements, no matter what the coloration or how well unified at the inception, have always degenerated into squabbling factions and rivalries...which the communists are better equipped to deal with than we are.<sup>249</sup>

Hence the US viewed Syria as an inherently problematic and uncooperative feature on the Middle East scene – from such statements it is evident that a historical intransigence towards each other was becoming embedded on *both* the American and Syrian sides.

#### 3.5.1 A brief alliance

The US initially feared that 'an independent Syria' would become even more hostile toward Israel, and thus at first concluded that Syria's defection went against US interests.<sup>250</sup> But based on reports that the rebels were, in fact, 'fairly well-disposed toward the West',<sup>251</sup> the US began to see the potential advantages of the break-up, and covertly encouraged the new Syrian regime to pursue a pro-western course.<sup>252</sup> The new Syrian premier was Ma'mun Kuzbari, holding the positions of Prime Minister, Defence Minister and Foreign Minister, ruling by decree, and considered as someone capable of 'changing his political orientation at

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<sup>248</sup> The US prepared themselves for 'considerable repercussions which might occur throughout the Near East if Nasser's position and prestige were seriously weakened as the result of this rebellion'. William B. Grant of the Executive Secretariat to Department of State, 28/9/1961, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:259

<sup>249</sup> Memo from Dept of State Executive Secretary Battle, to Bundy, Central Files, 30/9/1961, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:269-70

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> William B. Grant of the Executive Secretariat to Department of State, 28/9/1961, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:259

<sup>252</sup> Memo from Robert W. Komer of NSC to President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Mc George Bundy, 28/9/1961, *FRUS*, *Ibid.*, 262

will'<sup>253</sup> - but yet again, the implications for Syrian domestic politics and the potential fragility of the regime did not instil caution in American support. Kuzbari kept the Communists in prison, was very much on the right of Syrian politics, and pledged closer political and economic relations with the US than Syria had ever permitted in the past.<sup>254</sup> His Ministers began immediately by requesting an aid agreement, which even took the US by surprise, acknowledging that 'Syria never previously was willing to negotiate.'<sup>255</sup> Thus, in order to help the regime to survive, the US agreed to provide political and economic support; they indicated that they would even consider supplying arms, something that they had never previously been willing to do.<sup>256</sup>

In a private memo outlining US policy towards Syria, the US stated that despite the fact that prospects for political stability were poor, the US would continue to encourage the present regime and 'discourage internal realignments detrimental to our interests'. The US also wanted to prevent external actors from causing trouble for the 'friendly' Syrian regime, outlining that it would try to restrain Israel from provoking them.<sup>257</sup>

Furthermore, the US decided: there should be greater cultural exchanges and visits between the countries; the US would engage Syria in the UN and with other Western and Latin American countries; it would also direct European countries to supply arms to Syria (believing that a benign source of arms would have a major role in maintaining stability in Syria). The US also planned to provide training and technical assistance, financial loans from the Development Loan Fund, and to respond to Syrian requests for surplus foodstuffs (worth over \$15 million under the PL480 Assistance Programme).<sup>258</sup> The US pledged to promote US-Syrian trade, help build a free enterprise system, and to encourage the IMF and other countries to assist with up to \$40 million worth of loans and the restoration of a free currency.<sup>259</sup> Finally, the US guaranteed it would secure the private payment of outstanding and unpaid fees from TAPLINE to Syria in the region of \$8 million.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Memo from Dept of State Executive Secretary Battle, to Bundy, 30/9/1961, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:269-70

<sup>254</sup> Memo from Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot) to the Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs (Strong), 3/11/1961, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:321

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 323

<sup>257</sup> Memo, Battle to Bundy, 16/11/1961, *FRUS*, 17: 331-338

<sup>258</sup> Policy Directive prepared by the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, 27/2/1962, *FRUS*, 17: 495

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 496

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

The first test for the US-Syrian alliance came in October 1961, when Israel planned to divert Jordanian waters to the Negev, and began planning for a nuclear energy programme. The US did little to restrain Israelis based on their military superiority, which the US was confident would inhibit the Arabs from attacking.<sup>261</sup> When the Syrians did express strong opposition to Israeli intentions, the US attributed it to ‘trouble-making’ from the Egyptians, rather than genuine disagreement with the Israelis, and urged the Syrians to keep to the existing armistice.<sup>262</sup> Yet even this pro-Western Syrian government could not accept the US’ assessment of the issue, and lamented the US’ failure to recognise that ‘Syria and other Arabs are still at war with Israel’.<sup>263</sup>

To further exacerbate tensions, and despite the official cease-fire, clashes between the Syrians and Israelis on the disputed territory of Lake Tiberias were occurring with increasing frequency in February and March of 1962. Israel accused the Syrians of sparking the crisis by firing rifles at Israeli fisherman and Israeli police patrol, while the Israelis responded with raids over the border, targeting Syrian gun positions on 16-17 March. While accepting that Israel had ‘applied force of much greater magnitude than that directed against Israel’, the US focused its efforts on restraining Syria.<sup>264</sup> The Syrians, in protest against the US’ passivity, threatened to take the matter to the UN Security Council, seeking to induce the UN to compel Israel to comply with partition and refugee resolutions, or otherwise to face expulsion from the UN.<sup>265</sup> The Syrians also demanded that the US Government take a public position against Israeli diversion of waters from Jordan, threatening in private the ‘destruction [of the] US’ position in the Middle East, an advancement of Soviet causes therein, and risk of Arab-Israeli war.’<sup>266</sup>

However, throughout this episode it is notable that, while of course the US still maintained its support for Israel, it was more willing to castigate the Israelis in public, not merely to prevent Syria from turning towards the Soviet Union, but out of a genuine belief that Israeli actions were inflammatory. Hence, US responses deliberately emphasised condemnation of Israeli retaliations.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> CIA files, 5/10/1961, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:288

<sup>262</sup> Memo from Grant (Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (McGhee), 24/2/1962, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:490

<sup>263</sup> Telegram from Syrian Embassy (Dawalibi) to the Department of State, 28/2/1962, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:502

<sup>264</sup> Memo of conversation: Drafted by Hamilton, 21/3/1962, *FRUS*, 1961-62, 17:534

<sup>265</sup> Telegram from US Embassy in Syria to Department of State, 24/3/1962, *FRUS*, 1961-2, 17:543-544

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid*, 544

<sup>267</sup> Memo from Secretary of State Rusk to Kennedy, 28/3/1962, *FRUS*, 1961-2, 17:552

Kuzbari's regime did not last long, as was often the case with pro-Western regimes in Syria, and was overthrown within two years; what, therefore, is the significance of this short episode of Syrian history, so soon eclipsed by the Ba' thist Revolution, in understanding the history of US-Syrian relations? There are a number of important conclusions that can be drawn from this case.

First, the speed and assurance with which the US was willing to support the new regime, describing it as 'the best and most pro-Western in a decade...[that] deserves our immediate support'<sup>268</sup>, reflects how simplistic US policy assessment towards Syria was in this period – even more so given all their previous misgivings about the volatility of Syrian politics, the fact that this was yet another military dictatorship, and despite all reports from the region advising that the regime was unlikely to survive for long.<sup>269</sup> However, it does also reflect the continued fear with which the US contemplated a nationalist regime that might be opposed towards the US and favourable towards the Soviet Union.

Secondly, it becomes increasingly evident from a reading of the documents that the US' policy on Syria was unsophisticated (particularly compared to the calculated and nuanced approach adopted in its Egyptian and Saudi policies), lacked a coherent strategy, and was based on a muddled reading of Syria's importance in the region. Thus on one hand, Syria was significant enough to prompt a risky, and ultimately damaging, US-sponsored coup in 1957; but on the other hand, there remained a lingering perception that investing support and aid in Syria would not produce much strategic head-way for the US in the region - as a US official put it, 'from a strategic point of view, is it more important to cozy up to five-million volatile Syrians or to make our peace with the largest and most influential country of the Arab world?'<sup>270</sup> In the US' view, Syria was not a key bilateral counterpart in the region, with whom to negotiate and compromise – its unreliability so far had made that unnecessary; but it had the capacity to be either an instrument or a hindrance to US strategy, and when those occasions arose, the US reacted to exploit, thwart or redirect events.

A third issue to highlight is the depth of Syrian-Israeli antipathy, as well as US support for Israel, which has always been a central and negative factor in US-Syrian relations; it would appear that even with the most cooperative of Syrian regimes, Israel remained an obstacle to closer US-Syrian relations – the only Syrian leader to adopt a positive policy towards Israel

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<sup>268</sup> Komer's comments on Talbot's memo, cited in footnote 1, 3/11/1961, *FRUS*, 1961-63, 17:323

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*



had been Husni Za'im, who lasted less than five months in power. Nevertheless, the US still urged greater restraint on Israel and was more willing to apportion equal blame on both Syria and Israel, when a friendly Syrian regime was in place.

And a final analysis that can be made from this episode is to recognise that any regime to follow would be fully aware of the support – technical, financial and political – that the US had previously been providing to a pro-Western regime. The immediate withdrawal of that assistance would fuel any existing opposition and resentment towards the US. It would, of course, also justify and provide conclusive evidence for the new regime that the US was supporting its domestic enemies and was seeking to undermine its ideological goals. It would be interpreted as a boycott - and if the new regime was already inclined towards a 'radical', ideological agenda, this would be enough to push existing suspicion and caution towards open hostility. That is, of course, precisely what happened when the Ba'th came to power.

### **3.5.2 The Ba'thist revolution**

The Syrian Army, headed by a National Council of the Revolutionary Command, overthrew the Syrian Government and assumed power on 8 March 1963. This new group appeared to have much wider support than those responsible for previous coups in the country, especially in terms of support from the military.<sup>271</sup> The new regime was dominated by Ba'thists, while the numbers were completed by neutralists and military officials. Key Ba'thist Salah al-Din Bitar became Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Describing him as a 'moderate socialist and ardent pan-Arabist', the US was at first hopeful that there could be positive relations.<sup>272</sup> US optimism was formed on the basis that the new regime declared itself as anti-Communist; despite its recent experience with Syria, the US did not at this stage see Syria's Ba'thist commitment to pan-Arabism as a threat. Even recognition that it was anti-Zionist did not spark greater fears; indeed the US predicted Syria would now 'seek friendly relations with the West on a basis of non-alignment'.<sup>273</sup> The US misread the extent of Syrian opposition towards Israel, and that this was indeed the main driving-force of Ba'thist Arab nationalism and the cornerstone of its anti-westernism.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Memo from Director of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman) to Secretary of State Rusk, 8/3/1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, 18:406

<sup>272</sup> Memo from Rusk to Kennedy, 10/3/1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, 18:410

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

However, as Syrian-Israeli tensions flared up again on 20 August 1963, once again on the Lake Tiberias border, the extent of Syrian opposition towards Zionism dawned on the US. Moreover, the caution exercised by the previous Syrian regime was cast aside – indeed, the new Ba’thist regime had not even sought recognition from, or relations with, the west, a clear and deliberate show of independence from western opinion. In turn, and in contrast to its earlier policy, the US gave Israel its unreserved support, while categorically blaming Syria for starting the incident ‘as a means of uniting people behind them...since Israel is the one issue that forces all Arabs to unite’.<sup>275</sup> The US encouraged the UN’s severe ‘censuring’ of Syria on the basis that Syria was at fault, the Israelis had been reprimanded the year before and ‘above all...to warn Syrians off before they become too rambunctious’.<sup>276</sup> US reservations over the new Ba’thist regime were further raised when it became clear that other conservative regimes in the region appeared to view the Ba’thists and their brand of Arab nationalism as posing a greater danger than Nasser.<sup>277</sup>

Thus a new level of suspicion and intransigence had developed on both the American and Syrian sides; this was to escalate throughout the next four years, culminating in the outbreak of the defining Arab-Israeli War in 1967. This issue is dominated by both US and Syrian relations with Israel; therefore the run-up to and fall-out from that War will be discussed in the next chapter, which focuses on US-Syrian antipathy over Israel as a case-study. Moreover, the next phase marks significant changes in both Syrian and American politics, caused by the rise of Hafez Asad and the start of the US-Israeli ‘special relationship’ under Lyndon Johnson and Nixon.

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<sup>275</sup> Memo from Grant and Gardner (IO) to Harriman, 22/8/1963, State Dept, Central Files, POL 32-1 ISR-SYR): It is worth noting the similarity between the previous flare-up (beginning with Syrian kidnapping of three Israeli civilians and killing two Israeli Kibbutz workers on 19 August, and culminating with Israeli fire on Syrian positions on 20 August), as well the contrast in the US response.

<sup>276</sup> Memo from R. W. Komer of National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy, 22/8/1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, 18:681

<sup>277</sup> Telegram from State Dept. to US Embassy in Syria, 19/10/1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, 18:748

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has identified the roots and development of Syria's historical opposition towards US policies and involvement in the Middle East, and in turn American marginalisation of Syria and denunciation of its domestic-regional politics. Both those developments combined to produce a mutual hostility by the end of the period examined here, and contributed to the entrenchment of ideology as a necessary political framework through which Syria managed its foreign policy.

To answer the underlying questions that this chapter began with, and to apply the framework outlined in the previous chapter,<sup>278</sup> we can conclude that the determinants of Syria's foreign policy in the post-colonial era were dominated by Syria's mandatory history, which had had a significant impact on its lack of political stability, the entanglement of external issues with the domestic agenda, and its lack of representation in international diplomacy. The French and British mandates in the Middle East, and the establishment of Israel, both perceived as European, imperialist projects, set the historical context in which Syria's ideology was formed. As a result, and given the salience of ideology for the regional situation, Syria's foreign policy goals were imbued with an embattled Arab nationalist ideology to rid the country and the region of imperialism. It was influenced to a large degree by popular opinion, alienated from and galvanised by unrepresentative and constantly changing governments. In extension of these aims, Israel and any external power supporting Israel and colonial exploitation of the region were vehemently opposed. Realisation that the US was preoccupied with its own global strategy against the Soviet Union and sought to instrumentalise the Middle East for its Cold War, rather than support its independence and political development, disappointed Syrian expectations. US support for Israel and their perceived dismissal of Arab demands, 'imperialist' economic and defence programmes through Point IV, the MEC and CENTO, and the encouragement and instigation of clandestine regime change in 1949 and 1957, all exacerbated earlier Syrian mistrust and resentment.

The US, for its part, was prevented from striking closer relations with Syria early on due to overbearing French control over the country during the mandate, and its lack of internal political cohesion after independence. Although the US placed little economic value on Syrian relations and did not see it as a priority, it had attempted to develop bilateral links

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<sup>278</sup> See figure 3: *The Contingency of Ideological Formation and Implementation*, in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

through economic assistance; but since the purpose of such aid was to encourage regional stability and Arab-Israeli peace, it could not come without any conditions. Syria's rejection of all forms of US aid and refusal to compromise on those conditions, contributed to American frustration and the view that the Syrians were singularly intransigent and inherently anti-western. Syrian neutralism was conflated with Communism and Soviet 'satellisation', prompting alarmist, reactionary policies that lacked long-term vision – ironically these pushed Syria closer towards its Soviet ally for arms and security. What is particularly notable in this period is the US' reluctance to engage in greater dialogue with the Syrians and its tendency to marginalise Syria in regional issues, viewing it as volatile and unreliable.

Apart from brief interludes of cooperation, notably under Za'im and Kuzbari, this period of US-Syrian relations represents a worsening trajectory of opposition between the two states. Although the Syrians were cautiously optimistic at the start of America's involvement in the Middle East, one might argue that they were bound to scrutinise all US policies in a critical light given their experience of colonialism, and were therefore predisposed to view the US' role as negative and imperialist. Moreover, it is true that Syria, as with the other Arab states, frustrated the US with its parochialism and apparent aversion to understanding the Middle East's position in a global context.

However, it could similarly be argued that Syria, as a weak state just emerging from foreign occupation and threatened by interference from its neighbours, was always unlikely to appreciate or prioritise the global implications of its domestic or regional politics. From the Syrian perspective, if the US wished to come out of isolation from the Middle East, it had the responsibility (and capacity) as a global superpower to rectify the blunders of its predecessors in the region, to respect local aspirations, to approach the Arab-Israeli problem on an even-handed basis, and to familiarise itself with the deeper complexities and nuances of Arab domestic politics. An oversight of these issues might have been justified against the dangers of the Cold War; but on the other hand, the US' fear and anticipation of Soviet encroachment prompted it to engage in blatant alliance-building, which in fact provoked greater Soviet involvement than otherwise might have been the case.

These conflicting arguments demonstrate the extent to which interpretations widely differed on both sides, creating a stalemate in US-Syrian relations; uniquely it was one that was predominantly based on disagreements over regional issues, rather than bilateral issues. As

will be demonstrated through the following chapters, this was a trend that continued to be manifested in their future relations.

## Chapter 4

### Syria's Isolation and the Birth of the US-Israeli Special Relationship

This chapter builds on the last historical chapter to outline the key short-term events and issues that influenced the US-Syrian relationship prior to and at the start of Hafez Asad's presidency in 1970. In particular, it brings into focus the centrality of Israel to the antagonistic development of US-Syrian relations. In the short period between 1967 and 1973, the regional security dynamics changed significantly – the internal balance of power had tipped heavily in Israel's favour; external patterns of relationships had also altered so that the US' support for Israel was consolidated into a long-term American strategic position, while Arab dependence on the Soviet Union had begun to wane. The vulnerability that now hung over the Arab states pushed them into two opposing directions: one was to dilute their hostility towards Israel and thereby bring themselves closer to the US in the face of its growing military and economic superiority over the USSR; the other was to continue opposing Israeli occupation of Arab lands (even without Soviet support if necessary) and to engage the US in the region's disputes in the hope that America would apply pressure on Israel to comply with some of their demands.

Before going into the detail of this seminal period in the region's history, I will first outline here some of the key arguments and theoretical underpinnings that will be drawn out through this chapter. Firstly, I argue that this period has been crucial in shaping US-Syrian bilateral relations which continue to be constituted, in a constructivist sense, by their relations (or lack of) with Israel. Whatever the fortunes of the US' alliance with Israel, it will have an impact on its relations with Syria, and similarly, Syria's dispute with Israel will have a significant impact on its relationship with the US. This hypothesis has been borne out by other Arab states, whose relationships with Israel have largely determined their relations with the US, and vice versa.

Secondly, this chapter demonstrates the complex nature of security in the region, in the way it and its threats are perceived and constructed. Thus when security is discussed in relation to both Syria and Israel, what is traditionally taken to reflect a materialist concern needs to be widened to encompass and connect a range of issues, from military, to economic, to identity security. In this respect, the Copenhagen school's analysis of security is relevant. It proposes that the meaning of security is different depending on whose security is at stake and what values the respective parties deem needing protection. For Syria, the range of

security concerns in this period were not disparate ones that ought to be treated separately, but were all seemingly connected by one main threat, historically the colonial threat, and latterly Israel. European colonial activity was fed by an imperialist ideology, while Israel's territorial, political and cultural security was embodied in many ways in Zionist ideology – Arab nationalism thus emerged as a counter-ideology and acted as both an idea and a policy that combined a perceived need to protect not just Arab cultural, but also territorial and economic security.

Thirdly, this chapter contests the view according to neorealist theory that power inequalities necessarily cause weaker states to bandwagon with more powerful states. This chapter demonstrates that this is not always the case, as seen from the example of Syria. Its policies in this period support the argument that the balance of power dynamics in a given region need to be viewed in a more nuanced way, and that weaker states can *choose* who they bandwagon with based on values and ideas, not just power and material gain - although this does place them under greater pressure from the hegemons.

Finally, as a framework for analysis, this chapter will employ FPA. The systemic context is taken into account by recognising the intervention of cold war politics and geopolitical factors. But the chapter argues that ideas act as a valuable intervening variable, while the agents responsible for adopting and operationalising those ideas are also analysed. Thus the psychology and biases of leaders, their coterie of policy-makers, lobby groups, the military and public opinion, are taken into account as important constituencies and influences on foreign policy in the US-Syrian context.

#### 4.1 Hafez Asad's Ascendancy in the Ba'th party

As elucidated in the previous chapter, Israel had since its establishment been the main aggravating factor in Syria's relations with the west, particularly the US. It is impossible to over-state the role that Israel plays in any development of US-Syrian relations. Syria's popular and political adherence to an anti-imperialist agenda and Arab nationalist aspirations designated Israel as 'the number one enemy'.<sup>279</sup> It also strengthened Syria's relations with fellow neutral Arab states and its sense of ideological importance, given that Zionism – branded as the latest face of imperialism – was now on its doorstep.<sup>280</sup> Thus there emerged two elements to Syrian opposition towards the US: one, it was the dominant force of the west, and as such was already tainted by Syrian perceptions and experience of western imperialism; two, the 'universal resentment against Israel' within Syria produced a 'corollary resentment against [the] US as [the] power primarily responsible for Israel's existence.'<sup>281</sup>

The previous chapter already outlined the early development of Syrian mistrust as a result of US support for Israel during and after the Second World War. Alongside the impact this had on foreign policy and public opinion in Syria, one must also take into consideration the impact these developments had on the perceptions of future president of Syria, Hafez Asad. Too much can be made of the psychology and personality of leaders, and how their life experiences supposedly mould their future decisions in government. Such analyses can all too often take on a deterministic hue, sidelining pragmatic and contingent decision-making that is often rooted no deeper than in the contemporariness of leadership. And yet one must also be cautious not to lean too far the other way, where earlier personal experience is completely dismissed. The extent to which experience influences decisions is difficult to gauge categorically. However, it is safe to assume that such experience contributes to an individual's bank of contextual knowledge – after all, decisions and policies cannot be made within a vacuum of information, and even new information will be processed and made sense of through existing knowledge and perceptions.<sup>282</sup> Given Hafez Asad's thirty-year rule, his prominence in the Ba'th party from a young age, and the consistency of some of his

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<sup>279</sup> Telegram 435, Damascus to Washington, 24.2.1954, Sabri al-Asali (Syria National Party) Ministerial Statement rejecting the Baghdad Pact, cited in *FRUS* Vol. XIII, 515.

<sup>280</sup> Syria recognised that close alliances were needed in the event of war with Israel: Telegram 465, 8.3.1954, Prime Minister Asali to James Moose on 5.3.1954, explaining Syria's siding with Egypt and opposition to the Baghdad Pact, *FRUS* Vol. XIII, 519.

<sup>281</sup> Moose, US Ambassador to Syria, to Washington, 7.5.1955, *FRUS* Vol. XIII, 525.

<sup>282</sup> Robert Jervis, *Leadership, Post-Cold War Politics, and Psychology*, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), 769-777



strategic decisions in the region, it is imperative to consider his earlier experiences as an influential factor on Syria's future policies and the region's politics.

The seven years that Asad spent at the Latakia secondary school, where he completed his education in 1951 aged twenty, played a crucial part in forming his future outlook. He said: 'My political life started then and has not been interrupted since'.<sup>283</sup> Hailing from the 'Alawi mountains and confronted with the social inequalities of the town where he was schooled, Asad grew up with a strong class consciousness. The fusion of social inequality and foreign occupation directed him towards the political ideologies holding sway at the time. He joined the Ba'th at sixteen years of age. With the last of the French soldiers leaving on 17 April 1946, Syria prepared itself for the development of a more sophisticated political system, while ideological parties began to put in place their domestic agendas. For the Ba'th this meant mass recruitment and socialist reform. Such efforts and anticipations for the future were suddenly interrupted on 29 November 1947, when the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution to designate more than half of Palestine to the new state of Israel. As Asad himself opined, from this moment 'the contest with Zionism became the major theme' of his life.<sup>284</sup>

Asad's political development mirrored the politicisation of Syria's identity and its relations with its neighbours. Moreover, the continuation of Asad's political fervour during his military career, which he embarked on because he could not afford medical training, point to why the army was to become ingrained in Syrian politics; for just as Asad carried politics into military life, he, and others like him, in turn carried the military with them as they entered into politics, helping to weave Arab nationalist ideology into the fabric of political life in Syria.

Asad graduated as a pilot officer and was posted to the Syrian officer corps in the early 1950s. Since the 1949 military coup, it had become accepted that the army represented a key aspect of Syrian political life. After the overthrow of Shishakli and Syria's return to party-politics, Asad tried to recruit as many of his officer-colleagues to the Ba'th party. When at school, Asad's main ideological battles had been against the landed class and the Muslim Brotherhood; but in the army he saw the fault-lines existing mainly between the Ba'th nationalists and Antun Sa'ada's pan-Syrian nationalists. The Syrian Social Nationalist

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<sup>283</sup> Hafez Asad, interview with Patrick Seale, Damascus, October 1984. Cited in Seale, *Asad of Syria, The Struggle for the Middle East*, (Tauris 1988), 26

<sup>284</sup> Hafez Asad, interview with Seale, Damascus, May 1985. Cited in Seale, *Asad*, 35.

Party (SSNP as the party came to be known) was by now widely seen as being pro-western, anti-Communist and anti-Arab nationalist, whereas the Ba'th claimed to unite the Arabs and fend off western hegemony in the region.<sup>285</sup> Following the Malki affair, in which a member of the SSNP was found guilty of assassinating a leading Ba'thist army colonel, the SSNP was purged once and for all, leaving the Ba'th as the dominant force in the military. This contributed to Syria's history of suspicion towards Syrian-centric nationalism and notions of greater Syria that put a Syrian national identity above a wider Arab identity. This also had implications for Asad, as the advance of his own career coincided with the rise of his party within the army, and he was singled out for promotions and special training.

Instead of heading to Britain for training, as had traditionally been the case, Asad and his colleagues were sent in 1955 to Nasser's revolutionary Egypt – it was at this time that notions of a union between Egypt and Syria were already being floated by their respective policy-makers. Egypt's equipment was too poor for the training to continue, thus Asad and his colleagues were transferred eventually to Britain. It was in this period of turmoil for Anglo-Egyptian relations that Asad was able to observe the nationalist and revolutionary fervour in Egypt and the high-handed attitude of the British Foreign Office towards the Middle East.

Another early factor that was to have an impact on Syria's later foreign policies was Asad's suspicion of the Soviet Union. Despite Syria's leftist leanings, and the development of a political affinity with the Soviet Union over the years as a counter to the US, they were mistrusted for being an 'atheist' country, whose Marxist internationalism was a rival to Arab nationalism, and which had been amongst the first to acknowledge the state of Israel in 1948. Even though relations between the Soviet Union and Arabs had improved since the death of Stalin, Asad maintained this air of caution in his later dealings with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the USSR's antipathy towards the west made it an invaluable ally for the Syrian regime.

Finally, before he made his ascent in the Ba'th Party through the Military, an influential episode in the development of Asad's principles and perceptions was the failure of the United Arab Republic between Syria and Egypt. While it had initially been hailed by the Syrians as marking the revival of pan-Arab cooperation and strength, it ultimately turned out to be a sour experience of domination by the Egyptians who were on their own quest for

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<sup>285</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 50.

regional hegemony. The founders of the Ba'th Party, Aflaq and Bitar, were deemed by many in the Ba'th, especially those in the Military who had lost out in rank and political involvement as a result of the Union, as having sacrificed the Party without considering the Syrian people. This impacted Asad's political views on what should be the correct aims of the Ba'th, and also on the ineffectiveness of having 'theorists' leading the party. While they had articulated the ideological principles and goals of the party, they were not the best people to operationalise them. Moreover, their social standing, hailing from the middle class, meant they were perceived to be averse to the radical sentiment welling up below. The Union had direct consequences for the Ba'th, for Nasser dissolved all political parties. Akram al-Hawrani, earlier cited as a key player in the fortunes of the Ba'th and Arab nationalism in Syria, gave up his ineffective position in the UAR government in disgust, and accused Nasser of wanting to accommodate Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. Hawrani rejected any pragmatic approach with the Israelis, seeing the conflict with Zionism as an existential one in which survival was at stake.

Taking their cue from such developments, Asad and his co-conspirators in the army set about clandestine operations to bring down the Union. After a well-planned coup, the UAR was dissolved on 28 September 1961. Thus a new era in Ba'thist nationalism began, in which *practical* implementation of ideology, the primacy of the army and challenging 'imperialism' and Zionism above all else were at the forefront of the party's agenda, taking precedence over 'Arab unity' wherever it was deemed to be a hindrance. This could be seen as the first clear example in which Ba'thist nationalism prioritised resistance of Israel over Arab unity, particularly if unity led to a compromise of the former. This marked one of the key stages of evolution of the Ba'th party, but also in the interpretation and application of Arab nationalist ideology in Syria.

The period between the coup and the eventual Ba'thist revolution in 23 February 1966 saw a series of counter-coups and struggles for power between Ba'thists, Nasserites and conservative forces. The military continued to play an integral role in this time, entrenching itself further into the web of national politics. Asad simultaneously made his rise up the ranks of both the military and the Ba'th. The militarist Ba'thists concluded that to prevent the subjugation from external forces again, the military not only needed to be strong, but also sufficiently politicised in order to remain loyal to the ideological agenda of the Ba'th from within. Given the social constituency of the rising military class and their favouring of action over 'theorising', the 'neo-Ba'thist' revolution of 1966, as it is often termed, saw a

more militarised and socialist government taking over. The effective ruler was Salah Jadid, though he appointed Nur al-Din al-Atasi as Head of State, whose Sunni background would, he hoped, pacify those opposing his own leadership on the grounds that he was himself Alawi. He appointed Hafez Asad in the position of Defence Minister. A few months later, the abilities of the new Syrian government were put to the test as it confronted the prospect of a war against Israel.

## 4.2 The 1967 Arab-Israeli War

In the early 60s, due to Soviet arms supplies, there were many in the US State Department who believed the UAR had been in a position of strength compared to Israel, claiming that their armoury and firepower 'outclassed' anything the Israelis had, which partly explains why the US so heavily supplied Israel with arms.<sup>286</sup> But this notion was disputed by other authorities in the US state department, who argued Nasser's stockpiling of weapons in the UAR were 'useless', and that Israeli arms accumulation for the sake of pacifying its domestic population, was not a worthwhile, nor an effective policy for peace in the region or Israel's security.<sup>287</sup>

In this period, the US was faced with the dilemma of maintaining equilibrium in the Middle East or tipping the balance of its fragile diplomacy further in favour of Israel. A difference of opinion emerged between members of the State department and the President's office over how best to manage America's two strategies – that of garnering Arab support to fend off the USSR, and also protecting Israel. The US was already planning to support Israel over its planned diversion of Jordanian waters to support its growing population, a hugely controversial move. The State Department recognised that to grant Israel additional military aid at this time, as it was requesting, could unnecessarily antagonise Arab forces in the region, leading to a dangerous, possibly nuclear, arms race.

Despite this, President Kennedy decided to significantly increase both economic and military aid to Israel so that during his term in office, aid to Israel totalled at \$1bn since 1948, compared to the marginally higher amount of \$1.7bn earmarked for all the Arab states put together<sup>288</sup>; when President Lyndon Johnson took over in late 1963, he took this a step further by supplying specifically offensive weapons to balance what he saw as 'the disproportionate arms build up on the Arab side'.<sup>289</sup> While much of the literature states that the US Government did not go so far as to approve Israel's development of a nuclear deterrent, the declassification of South African government files from this period show that

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<sup>286</sup> Memo of conversation, Phillip Talbot in Washington, 3/1/1964, *FRUS* Vol. XVIII, 1964-7

<sup>287</sup> Robert Komer to Washington, 10/1/1964, *FRUS* Vol. XVIII, 1964-7, 11-14

<sup>288</sup> Kennedy, cited in Moshe Ma'oz, *Syria and Israel, From War to Peacemaking*, Oxford (1995), 86.

<sup>289</sup> Johnson, cited in Ma'oz, *Syria and Israel*, 86

Israel did eventually acquire the technology needed for this from the then Apartheid regime.<sup>290</sup>

The border skirmishes (particularly surrounding Lake Tiberias) in the early part of the decade between Israelis and Syrians developed into direct and increasingly violent battles between both militaries. Via so-called agricultural settlements, the Israelis had begun to occupy parts of the mutually accepted demilitarised zones (DMZ) which had been designated as neutral land since the 1948 war. While Israel gained greater control over the water and economic resources in those areas, Asad as Defence Minister responded by shelling the Israeli settlements.

Syria's actions, in addition to Palestinian guerrilla raids invited escalating Israeli 'retaliations',<sup>291</sup> which were (to Syria's frustration) accepted as legitimate self defence and met with no action by the UN. When Syria claimed that it could not control or stop the Palestinian guerrilla raids, the US in turn entered into the dispute with a warning that, similarly, it could not stop Israel if it chose to strike.<sup>292</sup> Asad felt that he was in a dilemma: if he did nothing it would have meant surrender to Israeli encroachment in the DMZ; but large-scale retaliation would, he conceded, bring about the army's defeat in the face of Israel's military superiority.<sup>293</sup>

Such increased militarisation of Syrian-Israeli enmity, over an initially low-key border dispute, contributed to the escalating tensions between Israel and all the Arab states, acting as the precursor to war in June 1967. It does also demonstrate the limitation of superpower involvement in the conflict – while they potentially could have stopped the escalation, it was the regional actors who played the key roles in starting the war. This also raises question marks about the widely adopted interpretation that Syria were the main provocateurs – indeed from the account provided, both the longstanding dispute over the DMZs,

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<sup>290</sup> The Guardian, Revealed: how Israel offered to sell South Africa nuclear weapons, 24 May 2010. For statements on previous uncertainty about Israeli nuclear weapons see David Lesch, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict- A History* (OUP 2008), 199-200

<sup>291</sup> See Janice Terry, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Role of Lobbies and Special Interest Groups*, Pluto Press (2005), which outlines that the word 'retaliation' has become politically loaded to imply that there is culpability of aggression on one side (the Arabs), and self-defence on the other (the Israelis).

<sup>292</sup> Memo, Houghton to Battle, 15/5/1967, (US State Department Records, National Archives, Maryland, hereafter referred to as SD) SD Entry A1 (5624) Lot#72D490, Record Group 59, Box 8

<sup>293</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 120

unchallenged Israeli settlers and Israeli retaliations, also contributed to rising tensions. This highlights the historiographical difference that is at times lost in accounts of the 1967 war.<sup>294</sup>

The ruling figures of the key states, their personal histories and political biases, had a significant bearing on the march to war. For Egypt, Nasser was a victim of his past glories in Suez; his inability to challenge Israel over its actions in the region, and his perceived passivity over Palestine, led people – in Egypt and elsewhere – to question his assumed leadership of the Arab nationalist struggle. In an attempt to repair this damage he veered further to the left, increasing links with the USSR and even the Viet Cong to engage in empty sabre-rattling – much to the anger of the US.

In turn, the US leadership, having been willing to see him as someone worth negotiating with in the past, now saw Nasser's moves as deliberate antagonism and were happy to see him disciplined and curtailed. Lyndon Johnson was an even more pro-Israeli president than Kennedy had been before him<sup>295</sup>; thus Nasser's actions and bellicose rhetoric (all for show and not with intent) further alienated Washington and meant that the US was less likely to restrain Israel in the event of war.

Israel, for its part, was far more willing to escalate the level of confrontation than the Syrians or indeed any of the leaders anticipated. Nasser's provocation was not seen as threatening, but rather as an opportunity to be exploited. The Prime Minister, Levy Eshkol, being far more cautious than his political peers and the Israeli public, came under pressure and finally stepped down on the eve of war, giving way to a war coalition including militarists Moshe Dayan, Shimon Peres, Yitzak Rabin and the even more right-wing Menachim Begin. Israel's objectives were no longer merely to hold on to the DMZs, or to teach Syria a lesson; their target was now the defeat of Nasser and Egypt, seen as both the greater threat and the greatest prize since 1956. Beyond this there were those who saw war as an opportunity to expand Israel's borders permanently and redraw the map.<sup>296</sup>

The scale of war hoped for by the Israelis was the complete reverse of the intentions and predictions of the Syrians who did not have the capability to engage in all-out warfare.

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<sup>294</sup> The history of the war is contested among scholars: Shalev (1994:50) and Daniel Pipes argues that the Arabs held greatest responsibility for the war through radicalisation and deliberate provocations; Shlaim and Seale argue that Israel were already looking for a *cassus Belli* to strike Egypt and expand territorially; Itamar Rabinovich settles for a cycle of escalation from both sides, with neither side seeking war, *The Brink of Peace, The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, (Princeton 1998) 19-23

<sup>295</sup> Ma'oz, *Syria and Israel*, 86.

<sup>296</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 128

Their only way of responding to Israel's encroachment into the DMZs had been to sponsor limited guerrilla raids - what Asad called a 'people's war' -<sup>297</sup> but they had not wanted an escalation beyond the Syrian-Israeli borders. What they did not calculate was their inability to control the actions and motives of the Palestinian guerrilla movement, who saw the advantages of an all-out Arab-Israeli war for their own cause. In the face of increased tensions between Syria and Israel, the under-fire Nasser felt compelled to demonstrate his pan-Arab credentials by signing a defence pact first with Syria and then Jordan, agreeing to come to their aid if they came under attack. Though Nasser had no intention to fight a war with Israel and was unprepared in the event, this provided Israel with the opportunity to bring Egypt into the sphere of war and – given Israel's military superiority, assured US backing and better preparation – to inflict a likely defeat on their old foe.

Between November 1966 and April 1967, Israel launched an invasion into the West Bank of Jordan and escalated its air battles with Syria, forcing Egypt to respond by moving its troops onto the Sinai border with Israel. What Egypt intended to be a deterrence to Israel and a launch for negotiations, provided Israel with the *Casus Belli* it was looking for to pursue a full-scale war against the Arab states (with tacit and full approval from President Johnson), in order to annex more territory and enhance its security position.<sup>298</sup> In the week-long war the Arab states endured a crushing defeat. Israel took the Egyptian Sinai, the Jordan West bank and the Syrian Golan Heights. On 5 June, Syria lost its airforce, on the 10<sup>th</sup> the Golan was captured; on the same day, a ceasefire was announced, but despite this Israel went on to capture Quneitra, the main town of the Golan, as well as Mount Herman on 12 June – a strategic high-point on the Golan, which the Israelis set up as an electronic listening post and from where they could 'monitor every movement in the Damascus plain'.<sup>299</sup> Over the course of the war, six hundred Syrian soldiers were killed from continuous bombing and napalming; the town of Quneitra was utterly destroyed, becoming a symbol of Syria's sense of injustice, while its inhabitants and those from surrounding areas were forced to flee, leaving some 120,000 displaced Syrians.<sup>300</sup>

The significance of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war for the region as a whole, its causes and consequences, has been analysed in great depth elsewhere and need not be revisited in

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid, 191-120

<sup>298</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.,142.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.,140-141



further detail here.<sup>301</sup> It is sufficient to emphasise that the outcome of the war was militarily and politically disastrous for the Arab states and had a grave psychological impact: suddenly their Arab nationalist identity and its capacity to unite the Arabs was called into serious question. This was accompanied by the realisation that Israel, with its small population and all its vulnerabilities, had surpassed all the Arab states in its military power and tactical awareness. The war was a pivotal event in consolidating Israel's statehood and stake in the region, as well as an asymmetrical military and economic situation. It also served to stamp US dominance in the region as the patron of the victors versus the USSR.

However, beyond its general impact on Arab morale, the war had a particular, constitutive part to play in the future triangular political dynamics between the US, Syria and Israel. The rest of the chapter will now focus on the impact of war on the development of US-Syrian relations. Firstly at a domestic level, the failures of the Syrian army, the humiliating loss of the strategically vital Golan Heights, the destruction of the civilian town of Quneitra by the Israeli army after the official ceasefire, and the roles played by both external and regional actors, provoked in Damascus both introspection and a deeper mistrust of enemies and allies alike. The strategic wisdom of Salah Jadid's government's militaristic approach, not just in the war, but prior to it, was now scrutinised more openly – militarism had become a part of the Ba'thist revolutionary ideology in the 1950s and 60s, but should it be adopted to the point of jeopardising Syrian and Arab interests?

This was an observation not lost on Hafez Asad, who himself carried the guilt of overseeing the air-force and being connected with its failures. Such a humiliating defeat could not be repeated, and change at the top of the regime – not just in personnel but also in strategy – was becoming viewed as a matter of urgency, setting in train intensified rivalry within the leadership and debate about the future of Syria's political approach, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Secondly, the war did not just generate introspection and have a negative effect on Syria's morale; it also had a major influence on Asad's personal, long-term perceptions of the US as the bankroller of Israel, and the Soviet Union's unreliability as a key ally. Thus the need for a more strategically competent, less reactionary and perhaps more pragmatic government was simultaneously tied to *deepening* hostility and mistrust towards the US, not the opposite.

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<sup>301</sup> For accounts of the 1967 War see Seale, *Asad*, 117-141; Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall- Israel and the Arab World*, Norton (2001); 236-250, Ma'oz, *Syria and Israel*; Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 204-214

The sense of international law being violated with impunity – for example, Israel’s unilateral invasion of Arab territories, the sacking of Quneitra even after the declaration of a cease-fire, and the occupation of seized land through civilian settlements which permanently displaced Arab communities that had evacuated during the war – provoked Syrian anger and charges of double standards. It also meant the ensuing American proposals for peace were treated with disdain by the Syrians, mirroring what they felt was Israeli disdain for UN laws safeguarding Arab security.

### 4.3 Aftermath of the War

In the months following the outbreak of the 1967 War, the United Nations issued Security Council Resolution 242 on the 22 November. The text of the resolution emphasised the ‘inadmissibility of acquisition of territory by war’ and the need to work for a ‘just and lasting peace in which every state in the area can live in security’. It stipulated that all states should act in accordance with article 2 of the UN Charter. Crucially, it laid down two principles, with implications for both Israel and the Arab states. The first of these was ‘the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in recent conflict’. The second was: ‘The termination of all claims or states of belligerence and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries free from threats or acts of force.’ In addition to these principles, the resolution also affirmed:

- 1) The guarantee of free navigation (for all states) through international waterways in the area
- 2) A guarantee for achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem
- 3) A guarantee of territorial inviolability and political independence of every state in the area, through measures including the establishment of demilitarized zones

Resolution 242 was supposed to set the basic goals and parameters of a possible peace settlement. But efforts to move the parties concerned towards that settlement required more than the rhetoric of a UN resolution; for it carried no condemnation, apportioned no responsibility, nor conveyed a clear timeline or potential sanctions that might have induced greater urgency among the states involved. Amidst a continuing war of attrition, the US attempted (and largely failed) to secure cease-fires through an initiative set up by Secretary of State William Rogers (known as the ‘Rogers Plan’), and sent Ambassador Jarring on a diplomatic mission to sell the prospect of peace negotiations to the Arab states. For the Syrians, the resolution did not go far enough to force Israel’s withdrawal from Arab territories; furthermore it appeared to equate the urgency of Israeli withdrawal with a reciprocal diplomatic recognition of Israel on the part of Arab states – given that Syria at this stage contested not only Israel’s borders but what it saw as Israel’s illegitimate occupying status, it could not accept such a proposition. In protest at the resolution’s perceived leniency towards Israel and disregard for the refugee problem which long pre-dated the 1967

war, as well as in protest at America's contribution to Israel's victory, Syria refused to accept resolution 242 or to receive Ambassador Jarring in the country.

Beyond this, the US also enacted its own policies independent of the UN to address the volatility prevailing in the region in the aftermath of war. It imposed a complete embargo on the sale of items that could be of military significance to the Arab states and Israel. Despite their attempts and requests to restart trade, the embargo remained firmly in place towards Egypt, Syria and Iraq, and was enacted most consistently against the Syrians. In contrast, the embargo was soon lifted for Israel. Officially, the US justified their contradictory actions by arguing they had 'diplomatic relations' with the Israelis, whereas they did not with the Arab states.<sup>302</sup> The US further argued that since the Soviet Union did not exercise any restraint in its military sales to the area (i.e. to Arab states) it felt compelled to reassess its own policy.<sup>303</sup> In this way, the policy was portrayed as an attempt to restore military parity in the region, even though US weapons were far superior to those of the Soviet Union.

It was an argument ill-received by the Arabs; thus when, in 1968, the Americans agreed to the sale of 50 F-4 Phantom supersonic jet aircrafts to Israel worth a total value of \$200m in order to boost Israel's Defence, they were severely criticised by the Arab states, which was then manifested among the Arab public with street protests against the US and western personnel.<sup>304</sup> The US also breached the embargo by supplying weapons to Jordan to prevent it from turning to the Soviet Union; this effectively polarised the region even more than before, between allies of the US and allies of the Soviet Union.

It was during this period of existing tension that matters were made worse by Syria's hijacking of a US plane. One of the first jobs of the newly elected President, Robert Nixon – who replaced the Johnson administration in January 1969 - was to condemn the hijacking and order the extradition of the perpetrators. Immediately then, prospects for US-Syrian rapprochement and thereby a smoother path towards peace negotiations appeared dim.

While the issues of weapons sales and terrorism rumbled on, the potential peace settlement was still on the table but faced several problems. Resolution 242 had in fact done no more

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<sup>302</sup> Memo, Sisco to Secretary of State, 21/1/1974, *SD* File: Strategic Trade Control, Syria 1973. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>303</sup> Statement on situation in ME, Torbert to Gude, 10/11/1969, *SD* Entry A1 (5624) Lot#72D4, RG 59, Box 6

<sup>304</sup> Memo of conversation, Davies, Scotese and Jordanian Ambassador, 27/8/1969, *SD* Entry A1 (5624) Lot#72D4, Record Group 59, Box 6

than symbolise the deadlock that now existed between the Arabs and Israel - the Arabs interpreted it as demanding Israel's complete withdrawal behind the 1967 borders prior to negotiation, whereas Israel saw it as a demand for the recognition of Israeli sovereignty and security before any return of land.<sup>305</sup>

In the face of this deadlock the US became preoccupied with the Jordanian and Egyptian sides of the settlement, viewing Jordan as 'the most ready' to accept Israel as a neighbour, and Egypt as having 'earned the right to make peace' through its size and importance in the region.<sup>306</sup> In contrast, the US stated its main reason for 'ignoring Syria has been the Syrian government's refusal to accept the principle of a peaceful settlement.' The Syrians' unwillingness to endorse UN resolution 242, to hand over militants, or to allow US Ambassador Jarring to enter the region, showed them to be 'typically intransigent' in America's view, and justified their policy of non-engagement with Syria's grievances.<sup>307</sup> The Syrians, for their part, felt non-cooperation was the only means by which they were able to voice their condemnation and anger at the occupation of Arab lands and the perceived waiving of Israeli culpability by the US.

America's silence over Syria's situation (its loss of land, large numbers of military casualties, displacement of its people) further deepened the mistrust felt towards the US and aggravated its enmity towards Israel. The US, however, remained confident about its policy, basing it on an assessment that at that moment there was 'virtually no chance'<sup>308</sup> of a Syrian-Israeli settlement, at least not before Israel had settled with Jordan and Egypt. Not only was it deemed logical, it also allowed the US the opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of cooperation versus the consequences of obstructionism, making an example of Syria and its non-compliance.

Thus 1969 saw the emergence of the policy of '*separate peace*', one which would have lasting consequences for Syria, its relations with the US and indeed for the wider region. It is true that the Syrians had framed the logics of this plan by refusing to accept UN resolution 242, unlike its Arab neighbours. Their intention had been to pressurise its neighbours to follow suit and form a united Arab front, one that would be stronger against Israel and in negotiations with the US; moreover the refusal to accept 242 was designed to act as a

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<sup>305</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), 198-99

<sup>306</sup> Kissinger, *Upheaval*, 199

<sup>307</sup> Draft US position on Israeli-Syrian settlement, Baas to Roger Davies, 18/12/1969, SD Entry A1 (5624) Lot#72D4, Record Group 59, Box 6

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

message of defiance and intolerance for the continued occupation of Arab land, contravening, as the Syrians saw it, international law. However, the US determined that 'problematic' Arab states should no longer be allowed to influence its own agenda for the region, and it was the US which wished for and instigated the policy of separate paths to peace – a policy which the Syrians were always to view as a deliberate move to irrevocably divide the Arabs and deny justice to both Syrians and Palestinians.<sup>309</sup>

Nevertheless, despite leaving the Syrians out in the cold, the US outlined a potential incentivising plan in the event that Syria would eventually come round and accept the necessity of negotiating with Israel. The preconditions for a Syrian-Israeli settlement<sup>310</sup> included the following:

1. All parties would agree on a timetable for action
2. The state of war and belligerency would be terminated and a formal state of peace established
3. Parties would agree on a secure and recognised boundary between them
4. Parties would work out an agreement on demilitarised zones
5. Refugees from the 1948 war would be offered compensation or repatriation
6. Syria and Israel would mutually agree to respect and acknowledge each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability and political independence
7. The final accord would be recorded and signed by parties and held by the UN

In public, the Americans put the onus for further peace talks on the Syrians, with the implication being that they only had themselves to blame for the lack of progress on the Syrian-Israeli front. But they also acknowledged that as long as Israel retained the right to annex the Golan Heights, there would always be seeds for ongoing conflict in the Middle East.<sup>311</sup> Officially, Israel cited security reasons to justify annexation, so in response, the US sought a compromise by allowing Israel to retain a thin strip of territory along the crest overlooking the Jordan River (but not overlooking Lake Tiberias) thus assuring security for Israel's Hula Valley.<sup>312</sup> However, despite such overt attempts to reach a compromise, the US had privately conceded from an early stage of proceedings that:

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<sup>309</sup> Author's interview with Martha Kessler, Washington DC, May 2009

<sup>310</sup> See: Draft US position on Israeli-Syrian settlement, Baas to Roger Davies, 18/12/1969, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#72D4, Record Group 59, Box 6

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

The Israelis will not withdraw from [the] Golan Heights no matter what is decided by the great powers in this regard. If worst comes to worst, the Israelis are prepared to confront even the United States should the United States attempt to force the Israelis to pull back.<sup>313</sup>

Israel was keen to point out that the assurance of security was not enough, for their claim to the Golan Heights was not based merely on security but history and moral right. Israeli diplomat Ben Aharon reiterated the non-negotiable conditions of Israel's annexation by stating that the US must 'realize the depth of feeling in Israel about [the] retention of the Golan Heights'.<sup>314</sup> This forces a reassessment of the notion publicly promulgated by the US at the time, that Syria alone was the intransigent factor in any proposed peace settlement. Given its private statements to the US about its implacability on the issue, the notion that Israel was a passive actor merely waiting for the Arabs to accept universally accepted peace conditions is not viable with the documentary evidence. Rather Israel's predetermined and immovable position on what the outcome of any settlement should be (including permanent rights for Israel to annex the Golan Heights), significantly contributed to the existing stalemate between Syria and Israel.

As will be outlined in greater detail, the reason why in contrast other Arab states, Egypt and Jordan, did not experience the same deadlock in their negotiations was because they accepted Israeli conditions, almost fully and with few demands of their own. Noticeably in the State Department records, the Israelis were not questioned in their commitment to peace or asked to compromise as the Syrians were, not in private and never in public. The purpose of negotiations on the Syrian-Israeli front, from the American standpoint, was mainly to persuade the Syrians to accept the Israeli position, rather than to produce movement and bargaining from both sides. This argument is further supported by Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy, analysed in the next chapter.

#### **4.3.1 Emergence of the American-Israeli 'special relationship'**

Based on the above analysis, one might ask the question: why did the US make such little attempt to move the Israelis from their own position of intransigence, while simultaneously berating the Syrians for theirs? What bonds of loyalty or identity, what strategic or economic necessities, or what domestic political influences bound the US so closely to Israel and generated such a strong inclination to pursue Israeli interests on Israel's behalf? In the

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Memo of conversation, Aharon, Scotese, 17/10/1969, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#72D4, Record Group 59, Box 6

previous chapter, it was outlined that the US pursued this policy under Roosevelt and Truman, to a lesser extent under Eisenhower, and with increased vigour under Kennedy. This trend was continued and raised to greater levels under President Lyndon Johnson and the partiality became particularly marked during the 1967 War. When Nixon became President in 1969, he sought to temper the appearance of overt bias that Johnson had fostered<sup>315</sup>; but by that stage the US-Israeli ‘special relationship’ was already a fixture of US foreign policy. It had evolved into something that went deeper than pure strategic interests and was a virtually unshakeable commitment.

The 1967 war and the alarming rapidity with which the US and the Soviet Union were dragged into a regional conflict, creating the danger of a direct confrontation between the two superpowers, forced a reassessment of US strategy in the Middle East. The US could not protect both Israeli interests while at the same time seeking to strengthen the Arabs so they could be used as a bulwark against Communism, if they were both likely to be in conflict with each other. Moreover, Israel’s military victory and superiority in the 1967 War had put the US in a difficult position. No longer was it possible to play to international sympathy and a (now outdated) moral justification by claiming to support the ‘underdog’ in the region, while claiming to equally defend both sides was also no longer viable. While still in a dilemma over how it was to proceed in its engagement with the Middle East, the State Department produced a paper on ‘US policy in the Middle East’ drafted in the summer of 1968. It eloquently illuminates the nature of America’s dilemma:

‘...Israel cannot be described merely as a ‘disturbing factor’ in our relations with the Arab world – Israel and the nature of our relationship with it is a basic obstacle to our achieving better relations and exerting greater influence throughout the area. In a sense we are caught within a dilemma. On the one hand, we feel constrained to maintain a special association with Israel, while on the other, we seek to safeguard our interests in the Arab world which are being eroded because of our special relationship with Israel. The weakness of our position...is that we are trying to achieve both objectives, although they are incompatible.

It would be helpful if we were to recognize the difficulty in which we find ourselves and analyze the reasons for our special relationship with Israel and failure to achieve our goals in the area. Then, and only then, could we begin to approach the area and its problems with a greater degree of realism.

We have developed [a] special relationship with Israel for very valid reasons. But they are reasons not germane to Middle Eastern dynamics. They are associated, rather, with political factors at work elsewhere around the world, most particularly in the United States and in Western Europe. We should also recognize that Israel itself

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<sup>315</sup> Rabil, *Syria, The US*, 46.



holds the key to none of our interests in the area: it is not an effective deterrent to the spread of Communism nor an effective instrument for strengthening western influence there; it controls no significant amount of petroleum; it is not a factor in communications or transit facilities; and, by itself, it cannot bring about peaceful conditions. On the other hand, the Eastern Arab states do hold the key to our basic policy objectives, with the one exception of the one envisioning a peaceful resolution of area problems. This last one is attainable only through Arab-Israel cooperation.<sup>316</sup>

The paper then outlined two alternative policy routes. One was to ‘*maintain a low level of involvement in the internal and regional politics of the Middle East*’. The authors of the paper deemed that taking on an even greater responsibility in the region would require the US to play a far more decisive role which would not be possible ‘without alienating one or the other of the contending parties, or both’. However, it was also acknowledged that if the US chose to remain aloof from the hostile situation in the Middle East and did not weigh in heavily with the parties, ‘the Arab-Israel conflict will remain smouldering and will break out from time to time in open warfare’, while US Cold War interests would be continuously weakened. Thus the second route, and the one which the policy paper recommended, required the US *to make a serious commitment to one of two possible, and probably divisive, resolutions*, these being: ‘a) an end to Arab irredentism or b) a decision on the part of the Israelis not to seek their destiny as a nation apart from the Arab community in which they are located’. It was agreed that both options would generate resentment and opposition on either side of the conflict. If the US was to pursue such a policy, then it would have to be prepared to abandon the appearance of trying to placate both the Arabs and the Israelis – though there were many that already felt the US handling of both sides was far from equitable.

From the introspective tone of the paper, one might at first assume that the US was set to reassess its close relations with Israel and that, on the balance of US geo-political interests, the US would give its support to the Arab states. However, to the contrary, US opted to give its unreserved support to Israel after this policy paper was issued – a policy which reflected the President’s office and the view of the Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. From here-on in, the US saw Israel no longer as an isolated outpost of US interests in the region, but as a state that could also help the US fulfil its strategic goals in the region, an accolade that had traditionally been bestowed upon the Arabs.<sup>317</sup> And thus rather than pursuing incompatible

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<sup>316</sup> Comments on ‘US policy in the Middle East’, File: Pol-23, Arab/Israel, July-December 1968, Entry A1 (5624) Lots# 71D5, 71D22, Record Group 59, Box 3.

<sup>317</sup> Rabil, *Syria, The US*, 47.

goals, two key strategies were twinned, so that the US was now on course to focus its efforts on aiding the Israelis and further boosting their military capability and strength in the region.

As intimated in the policy paper, the key reasons for US support for Israel had not historically been strategic or geopolitical. Rather US-Israeli relations had been fostered because of personal ties between members of the US administration and Jewish identity, and an emotional connection felt towards Jews as a result of the Holocaust. Moreover, there was a large Jewish community living in the US whose voice carried more weight than that of Arabs living in another continent. When domestic politics became fraught, successive US administrations increasingly approached Middle Eastern affairs against the background of needing the support of the Israeli lobby.<sup>318</sup> Short-term political pragmatism at home played as much a part in America's decision to support Israel as the emotional ties of some US politicians.

Nixon's initial aim to establish a detente between all parties, was essentially discarded by this new policy – but it did reflect pragmatism to the extent that any type of peace – even an incomplete one, or an unjust one in the view of the Arabs – was deemed acceptable if it was in US interests. As for the support of Israel, this was a policy that had already been in motion under Johnson and Kennedy before him, but after this internal debate it was now accompanied with a strategic rationale as well.

#### **4.3.2 The Syrian post-war position and policy towards the US**

The last section looked at America's reaction to the outcome of the war and its increasing political inclination towards Israel; this section analyses the Syrian reaction to their defeat and to the US' policy.

Between 1967 and 1970, the Syrians saw no signs of progress for the recovery of the occupied Golan Heights, Palestinian territories or parity in the balance of power in the region. As a result, the Syrians harboured a number of grievances against the US for (as they saw it) aiding Israel in an illegal occupation against Arab aspirations and interests. The first grievance was the basic factor of the US' alliance with Israel. The Arabs reacted to the negative outcome of the 1967 War by enacting a boycott against Israel, which was led by the

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<sup>318</sup> R. Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire*, 121

Syrians - labelled ignominiously by the US as 'the most rabid of the Arab countries on this subject'.<sup>319</sup>

The US noted from the Ba'th's early foreign policy, it was not only the 'most belligerent of all the Arab states toward Israel', its preoccupation with Israel had 'dominated Syria's foreign policy' and as a result, it tended to 'shape its policy toward a given nation in terms of that nation's policy toward Israel'.<sup>320</sup> Even prior to the June 1967 War Syria had viewed anything American with 'profound suspicion'. As the US correctly asserted, the 'basic issue is the Palestinian problem and the total identification, in Syrian eyes, of the United States with Israel.'<sup>321</sup> After the war, Syria's animosity and association of the US with Israel only increased. The Syrian government severed relations with the United States with immediate effect, giving American official personnel only 48 hours to leave, whose lives according to US reports had been in grave danger while they remained in Syria. Although other Arab states, such as Iraq, Algeria and Egypt, had also broken official relations with the US in protest after the war, they still maintained diplomatic links by retaining personnel in their respective Interest Sections in Washington. Syria's break, however, was 'total'. The furthest the Syrian government went was to assign a clerk to the Syrian interests section of the Pakistan Embassy in Washington DC, Syria's protecting power in the US, while Italian officials had to represent the US in Damascus.

Moreover, the US continuously came under severe attacks in the Syrian press and visas were refused to American tourists. At this point, US-Syrian relations were at their lowest ebb. Things did not improve in 1968 when the US noted that 'the prospects for resuming relations with Syria are even bleaker than those of Iraq', with whom the US also had frosty relations since its own Ba'thist revolution.<sup>322</sup> According to the State Department the US had, up until 1972, very few direct contacts with Syrian officials from 1967 onwards.<sup>323</sup> An internal report on foreign trade in the Middle East further elaborated on the extent of poor relations between the US and Syria:

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<sup>319</sup> Telegram, Parker Hart to Seelye, 12/12/1968, File: Strategic Trade Control, Syria 1973. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>320</sup> Memo to Washington, 14/11/1968, File: Pol 2, General reports and statistics, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, Record Group 59, Box 2

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria, File: Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

To date, the Syrians have continued to be extremely hostile to the US and their public information media have castigated the US to a degree which even exceeds the hostile Peking propaganda. Furthermore the Syrian Government has boycotted American goods and has favoured the goods of other countries. The SARG has attempted to undermine the pro-Western governments in Jordan and Lebanon by means of sending fedayeen through Lebanese and Jordanian territory. This has invited Israeli retaliation which has contributed to the internal instability of these countries. Thus we do not want to do anything that would enhance the military capabilities of either the fedayeen or the Syrian Army.<sup>324</sup>

The Second main grievance, and apart from the US' general support for Israel, was Syria's frustration at the US-imposed embargo on the sale of weapons to the Arab states, as alluded to in the above statement. They saw this as a deliberate attempt to prevent the Arabs from developing not just their militaries but also their general domestic security infrastructure; even the import of police radios was vetoed by the US. Against this backdrop, the Syrians were especially vexed by the US' continued supply of arms and fighter jets to Israel, while their own military stockpiles deteriorated.<sup>325</sup> Indeed the US had become the major source of arms for Israel,<sup>326</sup> which were used directly against Palestinian and Syrian fedayeen – deemed as terrorists by the US and Israel, and as an important part of a legitimate resistance by the Syrians.

The third grievance, and most grating for the Syrians, was the US' ambivalent stance towards Israel's refusal to withdraw from Syrian land – for Syria, the most antagonistic of all Israel's policies was that which it maintained towards the occupied territories. The Israeli Ambassador to the US reflected his government's viewpoint when he told the Americans with regards to building settlements on the Golan Heights, that he:

saw no reason why Israel should not do what it wished to fulfil its responsibility for maintaining the territories under its control so long as Israel acted within the context of military occupation and abided by the Geneva Convention.<sup>327</sup>

Thus it was apparent that the Israelis did not perceive any need or pressure to withdraw from the Golan Heights seized during the war, despite its illegality under international law. Furthermore, they made it clear they had no intent to do so in the future by continuing to build settlements. In 1968 the Jewish Agency announced plans to settle a further 15,000

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<sup>324</sup> Letter, State Department, 3/12/1968, File: FT-2, Foreign Trade, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, 71D22, Box 3.

<sup>325</sup> Report – Factors affecting the Arab outlook and Prospects, 30/2/1968, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, 71D22, Box 3.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Memo, from SD legal advisor Robert Neuman to Paker Hart, 16/12/1968, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, 71D22, Box 3

civilians on the Golan Heights. Initially, the US did express disapproval, pointing out that the mentioned settlements, 'would...be in violation of the Convention', citing Article 49, paragraph 6 of the 1949 Geneva Convention pertaining to civilians, which stipulated: 'The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies'.<sup>328</sup> The ICRC Commentary<sup>329</sup> provided on the convention indicated that this clause was intended to prevent the *colonisation* of occupied territories in the aftermath of war. As an official at the US State Department highlighted, the clause was inserted to prevent practices similar to those adopted by Nazi Germany during World War II when it had transferred portions of its own population to occupied territories for political and racial reasons; thus, he argued, Israel was 'pursuing a policy with regard to settlements on the Golan Heights which is inconsistent with the intent of Article 49(6)'.<sup>330</sup> There ensued as a result of his comments some dispute within the State Department about the extent to which the Article in question prohibited *any* settlement on occupied areas; but there was no doubt that it clearly prohibited *colonisation* which, it was agreed, would occur if the number of settlers was substantial. This debate and conclusion was not discussed a great deal in public, and it was clear no action would be taken over it.

Thus there was an unusual situation in which the US itself clearly stated that continued Israeli occupation of Arab land and subsequent building of settlements was illegal under international law, but at the same time, it refused to put any pressure on Israel to withdraw following its strategic policy shift to defend Israel at the expense of the Arabs. With the strategic policy change outlined earlier, all US efforts in the Middle East appear to have inclined towards strengthening Israel's position as opposed to enabling the Arabs to realise their goals of recovering lost land and dealing with the repatriation of refugees. Instead of demanding Israeli withdrawal from land occupied during the war, the US enabled this situation to be framed as the status quo. This then put the onus on the Arab states to recognise and strike peace with Israel *in return for land*. Prior to this, the return of lands seized in conflict was an unconditional stipulation under international law; as Henry Kissinger elucidated in his memoirs, it was the US who altered this international norm after making this significant policy change in favour of Israel.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Memo, from SD legal advisor Robert Neuman to Paker Hart, 16/12/1968, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, 71D22, Box 3

<sup>329</sup> Picted

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Kissinger, *Upheaval*, 215-6

With Israel continuing to build settlements, and with the US effectively defending Israel's actions, Syria now felt that it had both the moral and legal argument on its side. Thus despite the US' policy, the Syrians felt that under international law, it was within their rights to recover their lost lands without the conditions that Israel and the US had placed on them. This position is one that Syria continues to publicly and officially maintain. As a result, Syria also became over time, a champion of the UN as the legal framework within which to operate and pointed the blame at the US for operating outside of it.<sup>332</sup> The legal route became a reflection of a moral argument for the Syrians, while international law was treated as an ally against the alliance of the US and Israel, seen by Syria as the real transgressors.

As for the fourth major grievance, the Syrians saw the US as deliberately using post-war Arab disillusionment, and its own superpower influence, to sow disunity amongst the Arab states. On one hand, the US observed that the war had united some Arab forces with the effect of 'downplaying the conflict between nationalism and Islam',<sup>333</sup> but on the other hand it had also set some regimes apart from others, producing cleavages within the collective Arab policy that could then be exploited by the US and Israel to initiate peace among *some* of the Arab states, if not all.

Jordan was marked as one of those countries. So even though the war had focused Jordan's attention towards the building of its military capabilities against Israel, the US also recognised this was a development that could be swung around; for unlike Syria, Jordan was not motivated by ideology, but regime security. As the State Department observed, in contrast to Syria:

King Husayn's main preoccupation is the preservation of the monarchy for the Hashimite dynasty. If he could do it by accepting Israel's existence he probably would do so, but he is inhibited from doing so by the pressure of Palestinians in Jordan and his revolutionary Arab rivals.<sup>334</sup>

Even if Jordan opposed Israel on an instrumental basis, for domestic factors and not out of any moral or ideological principle, this would have been sufficient for Syria's political

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<sup>332</sup> Author's interview with the Syrian Ambassador to the UN: Dr. Bashar Ja'afari, 17th February 2009, UN Headquarters, New York City  
11.30-12.30PM

<sup>333</sup> Report – Factors affecting the Arab outlook and Prospects, 30/2/1968, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, 71D22, Box 3.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

cause. However, any such expectations were dented as the US, recognising a weakness in the Arab front, put its efforts into swaying individual state policies.

It was not the case that there were no efforts or wishes on either the American or Syrian side to improve relations. Indeed, at one point, Egypt's decision to raise US representation in Egypt to Ambassadorial rank did stimulate Syria to bridge the divide. Moreover, the Americans still saw some benefits in maintaining modest relations with Syria – the 'maximum extent permitted by the Syrians' - which they hoped would include commercial and cultural activities at same level as other countries. In view of both geo-political considerations and of its potential in economic and human resources, Syria was deemed by the US to be too important to ignore, much less 'give up', and through some degree of normalisation of relations in non-political fields, the US sought to have rights to transit oil through Syria and to fly its aircrafts over Syrian air space. The Americans acknowledged that while they could not hope to change Syrian attitudes towards Israel, and thereby the US, they could help develop Syria into a 'modern nation', which would accrue subsidiary benefits for US economic and commercial interests in the region.<sup>335</sup>

However, these intentions failed to materialise. As the State Department correctly asserted, regardless of these non-political gestures, the 'main impetus for improvement of relations with the United States is forward movement on a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict'.<sup>336</sup> The Syrians held deep mistrust and anger towards the US, and the latter failed to calculate that its economic and cultural activities would also be viewed in a suspicious light. Thus Syria engaged in a number of acts to further widen the diplomatic gulf between the two states. In 1969, two Israeli passengers were detained in Syria following the hijacking of a TWA airliner on 29 August 1969. This became a matter of 'very profound concern to the United States Government'. The Syrian government had expressed it was willing to publicly reconsider releasing the two Israelis in exchange for two Syrian military pilots held by Israel since 1968 when their planes strayed over Israeli territory on a training mission and made an emergency landing on Israeli territory. However the Israelis had publicly rejected any suggestion of such an exchange.<sup>337</sup> In addition to this, the Syrians had detained several US citizens suspected of espionage for Israel. As was accurately observed:

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<sup>335</sup> Memo, D. Gamon to Houghton, 'US-Syrian relations – prospectives', 31/3/1967, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5624) Lot# 71D22, Box 4

<sup>336</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria, File: Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>337</sup> Letter, Torbert to O'Neill, 12/11/1969, File: Pol-23 TWA, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#72D4, Record Group 59, Box 6,

This, in fact, has been the general rule of our efforts to improve relations with Syria. Every time our contacts seem about to reach a conclusion, an incident has occurred between Syria and Israel, or on another front of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which sets us back to our original starting point.<sup>338</sup>

Thus as outlined above, there were several reasons Syria was so opposed to US and did all it could to hinder US activities in Syria and in the region. In summary, these reasons were:

- i. US support for Israel in the 1967 War
- ii. The continued US embargo on arms trade in the region, while it was lifted for Israel - indeed arms sales to Israel increased.
- iii. Nixon's policy shift that favoured Israel's stance in the conflict and reconfigured the return of occupied land as being conditional on peace (contra international law)
- iv. US failure to condemn continued Israeli settlements in occupied territories
- v. Perceived US exploitation of cleavages amidst the Arab ranks, demonstrated by American efforts to coax Jordan to sign a separate peace with Israel.
- vi. Suspected US espionage for Israel

The Syrians sought to communicate these grievances to the Americans, and it only exacerbated the hostility when the US dismissed Syrian anger as 'xenophobia'.<sup>339</sup> The notion that Syria's grievances were a result of irrational hatred of the US, rather than American policies, served to undermine Syria's political claims – this in turn enabled the US to sideline Syria, while Syrian opposition rather than being taken seriously was perceived as emotional and reactionary.

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<sup>338</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria, File: Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>339</sup> Memo, D. Gamon to Houghton, 'US-Syrian relations – prospectives', 31/3/1967, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5624) Lot# 71D22, Box 4



#### 4.4 Syria's Marginalisation and the Advent of a New Regime

The above analyses the bilateral relationship between the Syrian and American governments, but it is also important to analyse simultaneous developments at the regional level to understand state behaviour and changes taking place at the bilateral level. In Syria's case this is particularly important; it is fair to say that more than most states, Syria's policies at three different levels - international, regional and domestic – have been interrelated.<sup>340</sup>

Thus if we are to analyse the relationship between the US and Syria at this time from the domestic angle, we may ask to what extent their policies were supported by and reflective of the national mood in their respective countries. In the US, foreign policy, as in many democracies at this time, remained primarily a concern of the political elites and interested lobby groups, while the domestic agenda dominated popular political discourse. In Syria, however, foreign policy was intertwined with domestic politics. Given that it found itself on a constant war-footing at its borders against Israel, foreign policy was not only the preserve of the elites but was in the consciousness of many ordinary Syrians. When gauging the success or validity of any foreign policy action, it should be measured against the goals and values of not only the government but also the society within which it operates, even in a closed authoritarian system.

In Syria's case, it was not only victory against an enemy such as Israel that mattered; the principle of 'standing up' to the Americans and showing solidarity with the Palestinians and fellow Arabs was not only valued but demanded, even in the absence of success. This was alluded to regularly in the primary sources, highlighting that the Syrian public, more than in other Arab states, was cited as being hostile to the US and reflected their protests more vocally and openly. The goals and values in such a foreign policy were not pursued only in the hope of attaining material and military advantage, but were formulated on the basis of fairly rudimentary principles that were captured within Arab nationalist ideology, but were not constrained to those who called themselves nationalists or Ba'thists. The principles of anti-imperialism and opposing occupation were broad enough to attract the strong support of average members of the public, regardless of the political machinations of the party elite and controversies over domestic policies.

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<sup>340</sup> Hinnebusch, *Revolution*, 13; 143

Thus while the government of Syria was at this time weak and unstable, facing both international and internal party pressures, it was supported by its people on its stance against Israel. This is supported by the report at the time from Dr. Luigi Conte, the Italian officer in charge of American interests in Damascus, who claimed that the government enjoyed a great deal of popularity. He suggested that Syria was the first Arab country to undergo a 'real proletarian revolution', and felt that the grass roots popularity and degree of control of the regime in Syria was perhaps underestimated.<sup>341</sup>

However, despite such support, by 1970 the Syrian government was facing growing opposition from various quarters. Defeat against Israel had been a humiliating episode and increased criticism against the regime. There were those in Syrian society who had significant reservations against the Ba'thist revolution to begin with, despite its popular stance towards Israel, among them the urban merchant class and Islamist groups, as highlighted in chapter 2. Moreover, deep rifts also existed within the Ba'th party itself, which had not been resolved by the radicalist purges of 1966. Some in the party dissenting against the Jadid regime found a rallying point in Salah Bitar, once a Ba'thist, now outside of the sphere of the regime. Others such as Akram Hawrani and Amin al-Hafez were identified by the US as being distrustful of the US but also opposed to the current Syrian regime. They were marked out as potential agitators, and in such an event, the US kept channels open in case they wanted to contact the US with a view to changing the Syrian regime.<sup>342</sup>

The lack of experience and indeed incompetence among a number of those whom Jadid had put in key positions added to the weakness of government and its inability to face conflict with Israel: these included Yusuf Zu'ayyin as Prime Minister; Ibrahim Makkhus as Foreign Minister; Nur al-Din al-Atasi as head of State. Sectarian divisions were also becoming more apparent under Jadid, with the Druze marginalised after a series of coup attempts, while Sunni elements in particular were outraged at an article published in the Ba'th's military journal denouncing God and insulting religion on the eve of war. It was Jadid who brought Asad in as the Defence Minister after the radical 'neo-Ba'thist' revolution in 1966, and Asad in turn played a key role in quelling a major rebellion against Jadid; but their alliance unravelled with defeat against Israel. Jadid blamed defeat on the armed forces controlled by

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<sup>341</sup> Memo of conversation, 18/9/1968, folder 2, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, Record Group 59, Box 2,

<sup>342</sup> Memo of conversation, Machlani to D. S. Mak (acting deputy chief of Mission), 27/3/1968, Folder 3 of 4, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, Record Group 59, Box 2.

Asad, while Asad and his supporters in the army accused the leadership of undermining the army (and thereby its effectiveness in battle) through its political purges.<sup>343</sup>

These internal problems within the Syrian regime were further compounded by its growing isolation in the region. While the military had supported the regime in its more active 'defiance' of Israel, there was also an increasing realisation in some quarters that the Syrian leadership was pursuing a radical strategy that, rather than furthering the ideological cause, was proving to be reckless and threatening to its neighbours. Syria could not afford to tread an isolationist path; the Ba'thist regime had staked its role and purpose on its regionalist credentials, and to persist with a radical agenda that appeared to advance little else except Soviet geopolitical interests, put Syria in a negative light and awkward contradictory position.

Moreover, without sufficient military support from its Soviet allies or the capacity to back up threats, Syria's belligerence was in fact exposing its vulnerability and alienating it from its neighbours who felt Syria's posturing left them with less room to manoeuvre. By March 1968, plans were well underway to bring Israel and Jordan together in an agreement in which Israel would return some of the West Bank to Jordan and compensate for refugees, and Jordan would enter into economic cooperation with Israel – thus the US was set to increase economic aid to Jordan with the view of making it a 'showcase country'.<sup>344</sup> America's relations with the Saudis, Lebanese, and increasingly with Egypt, provided enough substance to continue with a settlement of the Middle East's problems without Syria. By September 1968, the US State Department privately reported that 'all the Arab leaders (with the exception of Syria) genuinely desired an end to the conflict with Israel', although none of them could express this publicly given popular opposition to such a move.<sup>345</sup>

By 1970, this trend became even more pronounced and problematic for the Syrians: the death of Nasser – increasingly mistrusted by the Syrians for his willingness to even contemplate a settlement with the US, but still tied to Arab nationalist goals nevertheless – hailed the arrival of Anwar Sadat, initially vocal about his opposition towards Israel and the US, but fast disassociating himself from a united front with the Syrians. Given its isolation,

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<sup>343</sup> Drysdale, Hinnebusch: *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process*; (Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), 22

<sup>344</sup> Memo, Paganelli to Houghton, 1/3/1968, File: Pol – Arab/Israel, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, Record Group 59, Box 2,

<sup>345</sup> Memo of conversation, Rizk and Mak, 17/9/1968, folder 2, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#71D5, Record Group 59, Box 2

the fact that Syria was still entrenched in its hostility towards the US was something that the US was able to ignore without (it thought) much consequence. The Jadid regime had portrayed its stance to be based on a fixed and Arab-centric ideology, rather than on common international principles, thus making it easy for the US and indeed Arab neighbours to dismiss Syria as an inflexible party in any peace plan and, therefore, one that was not worth negotiating with.<sup>346</sup> Rather than retaining the purity of Arab nationalist goals, this lack of pragmatism was in fact strategically detrimental to the principles the Syrian regime sought to uphold. Apart from this ideological debate, there were also straightforward power struggles at the heart of the Ba’thist regime. Amidst this internal turbulence, yet another coup against the government ensued; having at one time quashed an earlier challenge to Jadid’s power, Hafez Asad was now the chief instigator. With his links in the army and the power base he had slowly built up within the Party, Asad seized power in 1970, and was to hold onto power against the odds over the next thirty years.

Asad’s leadership, notably different from the Jadid regime for its pragmatic approach, marked a turning point in the nature of the Syrian regime, its *strategy* in foreign policy, and the internal stabilisation of the state. However, the notion that there was a change in the main substance of Syria’s foreign policy as a result of Asad’s pragmatism is contestable. Olson argues that he only *appears* to be more pragmatic (and by extension less ideologically motivated) when he is compared with the radicalism of the Jadid regime from 1966-70.<sup>347</sup> Olson contends that when compared with the Ba’thist and wider nationalist forces that *preceded* that regime, Asad was no more pragmatic than other Syrian leaders, while his policies seem consistent with his predecessors’ ideological commitment and strategies.<sup>348</sup>

I agree with this view up to a point: it is the case that when cast alongside Jadid’s particularly radical and revolutionary regime, Asad’s approach tends to be interpreted as being less ideological when this is not necessarily so. However, I contest Olson’s position that there is consistency between the leadership of Asad and pre-Jadid figures. Asad’s leadership was clearly set in different circumstances – regionally and domestically. Syria found itself in a more hostile neighbourhood after the 1967 War, even more isolated than before by the growing influence of the US and military power of Israel, and the softening positions of fellow Arab states towards both. As Israel had shown, its willingness and

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<sup>346</sup> Kissinger, *Upheaval*, 197-201

<sup>347</sup> Robert Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria 1947-1982: The Evolution of Ideology, Party, and State*, Kingston Press (1982), 144

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

capacity to retaliate to both military and political provocation was great and extremely costly for the Arabs. The external constraints on Syria's revisionism were therefore far greater than they were previously, and willingness to engage in belligerent rhetoric with limited gain had to be checked - especially when the state of its military was continuing to deteriorate.

Meanwhile, there was growing pressure on Syria's leadership to stabilise the country's economic situation, at a time when surrounding states were increasing in wealth and improving domestic infrastructure. Jeopardising stability and development at home by inviting tighter sanctions and more military threats was a risk too lightly taken in the past, and which would have greater repercussions amidst the changing economic and political environment by 1970. Finally, the Jadid regime had seen the growing alienation between the Ba'th Party, whose constituency was increasingly based among the rural and Alawi population, and the rest of the Sunni urban-based population. The former tended to be more radical, the latter less so, and they were becoming alarmed at Syria's regional isolation and the accusations that it harboured a sectarian regime. When Asad took over, he immediately embarked on a project to drastically increase the Party membership, particularly in the urban areas, in order to raise the government's legitimacy.<sup>349</sup>

Thus as a result of these different circumstances that Asad found himself in, I take the position that he was indeed more pragmatic than his predecessors within the Ba'th Party, due to a host of domestic and external pressures and constraints. Numerous events had shown that there was no such thing as glorious failure in the pursuit of 'ideologically pure' policies, adopted more for the sake of party endorsement and legitimacy than for the increasingly alienated Syrian population and principles of Arab nationalism; rather, the greatest threat to those principles were now seen to be Syria's marginalisation and yet another external reconfiguration of the region in the absence of an Arab nationalist voice.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the most important aspect of the ideology, in practice and increasingly in principle, was its opposition to external interference and lack of regional autonomy. A radical stance that a) purported to be holding true to a regionalist ideology, but which in fact led to marginalisation and irrelevance, and b) provoked war and in turn destabilised the country and the region, thereby inviting yet more external involvement, was seen as far more detrimental to the core ideological goals and security of the region than measured pragmatism. The notion, however, that Asad was ready to sacrifice all his

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<sup>349</sup> Olson, *The Ba'th*, 145.

political beliefs, especially given his personal experiences in his youth, does not give enough recognition to the power of ideas. Understanding how Asad's pragmatism was firmly situated in an ideological framework is an important nuance.

#### 4.5 Asad's Pragmatism and the Impact on US-Syrian Relations

Asad brought the pragmatic approach discussed above not just to the Syrian government's policies at a domestic level, but importantly to foreign policy as well. Having seen the failure of its policy of non-engagement, and the continued deference towards Israel by both the US and other Arab states, Asad sought to temper Syria's hostility towards the Americans and thereby raise its input in regional affairs. This was reflected on a number of levels. For example, after the 1967 War, Syria refused to receive Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Joe Sisco in Damascus, and designated its Deputy Foreign Minister, Zakaria Ismail, as the primary channel of communication – this had represented a fairly low level of diplomatic contact between the two states, and was a deliberate signal to the US that Syria did not seek closer relations. On his arrival as President however, Asad changed this policy by accepting the need for direct communication.

The olive branch was also extended in other areas such as trade. Thus Syria changed its policy of boycotting US goods, and began placing requests for sales of equipment that was of non-lethal military use – indeed the Syrians had sought to extend this trade to armaments in general, although this was not granted by the Americans. It is plausible to see this as a strategic decision by Syria, to increase its influence with the US by becoming a key outlet of trade which the US would not want to lose due to political problems.

This policy change can also be connected to the fact that the Syrians wanted to reduce their reliance on the USSR, and needed more modern western equipment, which their Israeli enemies had been able to take advantage of. According to Ghaleb Kayali, an ex-member of the Syrian Foreign Office, the Syrian government – particularly the military wing – had become disenchanted with the Soviets.<sup>350</sup> Furthermore, Asad personally, on becoming president, sought to make a cleaner break from the Jadid regime; having his own doubts about Soviet intentions and influence over Syria, he began to create a greater distance between Damascus and Moscow and the relationship was increasingly becoming an uneasy one. Syria successfully resisted signing a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union in 1972 although both Egypt and Iraq had done so. Of course ties were not severed – in particular the military links remained strong. Even as late on as 1973, Syria received 3 times the number of Soviet fighter aircrafts in the first half of the year than it had received in 1972, while Syria had acquired \$200m worth of Soviet arms, and there were 1400 Soviet advisors

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<sup>350</sup> Memo, Houghton to Washington, 16/5/1970, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#72D490, Record Group 59, Box 8

in Syria by June 1973.<sup>351</sup> Nevertheless, there continued to be strained relations because of the Soviet Union's increasing attempts to influence Syria, while its military failed to react to aid the Syrians when 13 of their aircrafts were shot down in September 1973. The shift in relations had a positive impact in Washington who observed that Syria was 'disposed to expand and improve its relations with other countries and to rely less exclusively on the Soviets for outside support.'<sup>352</sup>

In more substantial policy areas, Syria also demonstrated signs of accommodation and flexibility. In 1971, the areas of disagreement were highlighted as being Syria's rejection of the UN Security Council resolution 242, as well as its consistent support for the admission of the People's Republic of China to the UN and the expulsion of Nationalist China.<sup>353</sup> But on 8 March 1972, Hafez Asad finally accepted resolution 242, four and a half years after it had been passed. On the occasion of that announcement, however, Asad was at pains to reiterate that the Arab people had two aims 'from which they will not deviate or abandon: liberation of the occupied land and restoration of the rights of the Palestinian people.'<sup>354</sup> Asad argued that any international effort by Arab republics should reflect these two aims. While his change over 242 could be portrayed as an embarrassing climb down, this was not how Asad perceived it - rather he felt it was a way of making it difficult to 'keep the Golan Heights out of the Jarring picture'. Indeed Asad had understood that the reasons why there was less urgency on settling the Israel-Syrian front was partly because Syria had still not accepted 242.

At first the US showed signs of responding positively to Syria's concessions. It still maintained its policy of embargoing military shipments to countries that had broken diplomatic relations with it; but by 1972, the US did *consider* supplying weapons to the Syrians as an exception to its general policy, and taking into account that even an improvement of 50% of the Syrian military cargo vehicle fleet, though improving Syria's military capability, would not significantly 'change the basic quotient in the area'.<sup>355</sup> The US considered increasing wider non-military trade with Syria and showed willingness to overlook arrears in Syria's repayment of development loans. Moreover, the US recognised increased Syrian interest in purchasing US military equipment instead of from the Soviet

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<sup>351</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria, File: Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>352</sup> Memo, Sisco to Secretary, 18/12/1970, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#75D16, Record Group 59, Box 10

<sup>353</sup> File, Pol-1, General Policy Syria and Iraq - Entry A1 (5624) Lot#75D16, Record Group 59, Box 11

<sup>354</sup> Memo, Seelye to Sisco, 10/3/1972, Entry A1 (5624) Lot#75D442, Record Group 59, Box 14

<sup>355</sup> Angus Mundy to Kilgore, 17/1/1972, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)



Union as a positive move and a sign that the Syrian government sought to reduce the distance between Washington and Damascus.<sup>356</sup> The US also recognised the potential that Syria's growing petroleum industry presented to the US economy.

Moreover, with regards to the peace process in the Middle East region, the US gained further confidence on the potential for building on US-Syrian relations from Syria's firm stance against fedayeen activities on its own soil, despite Syria's rhetorical support for the fedayeen elsewhere. Crucially, the US perceived that the Syrians were ready to strike a political compromise with the Israelis, even if they continued to 'talk tough' in public and had initially rejected UN resolution 242. And finally, what the US regarded as the 'best indication of improved Syrian Government attitudes', was Syria's request for weekly visits to Damascus from the American consul in Lebanon – the US felt that this augured well for future diplomatic relations and positioning of US personnel in Syria which had hereto been prohibited.<sup>357</sup> The following makes the State Department's perspective clear:

Syria remains a negative factor in Middle East peace-making efforts, but under the Asad regime, which came to power following failure of Syria's attack on Jordan in late 1970, it is moving in the direction of greater pragmatism.<sup>358</sup>

The new Syrian government was also described by the US ambassador to Syria as:

More pragmatic, more responsible and less ideologically motivated than the previous Syrian regime. While of course the regime's policies leave something to be desired, this is a relative matter and our actions and reactions can be helpful in shaping the Syrian Government's future policies.<sup>359</sup>

While the following statement from the State Department provides another exposé on America's perceptions and its policy intent towards Syria:

...if we can re-establish an American presence in Damascus, despite Syrian and Ba'athi political sensitivity, there is a chance of starting a dialogue which could lead to creation of vested interests on both sides in reaching a settlement of our relatively minor bilateral financial problems. I very much doubt we could offer the Syrians, as an opening gambit, enough economic aid to persuade them to let us in through the

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<sup>356</sup> Memo, Sisco, Atherton and Talcott Seelye, 1/17/1972, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>357</sup> Ibid, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>358</sup> Memo, William P. Rogers to President Nixon, 24/1/1972, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630) The reference to Syria's attack on Jordan relates to Asad's shift from the Jadid position in supporting the fedayeen in Jordan, and opposing their clamp down by the Jordanian regime 1970.

<sup>359</sup> Memo, Seelye to Sisco, 17/1/1972, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

political door; but through the economic route there is a chance of gradually rebuilding a position of some modest influence in Damascus.<sup>360</sup>

There were of course on-going areas of disagreement.<sup>361</sup> But overall, there were clear signals of cooperative intent and indeed major policy changes on the Syrian side (as seen with the acceptance of resolution 242), which were in turn picked up and understood by the Americans. The US responded – to an extent – by approving the rather modest sale of 4,000 trucks and 175 ambulances, an example of one of the few instances of US-Syrian trade, particularly in areas of defence. However, despite such justifications provided by the State Department, President Nixon still refused to permit the sale of non-lethal military equipment to go ahead.

What, then, can be gauged from these developments about US perceptions of Syria? What is clear from such statements above is the State Department held the view that a more pragmatic Syrian government – one that was demonstrating greater strategic awareness – would also be, to a certain extent, abandoning its ideological principles. Moreover, the US intended that a greater level of communication and financial transactions should also persuade the future direction of Syria's policies to a more US-friendly position.<sup>362</sup> The US was further encouraged in this view by Syria's renewed diplomatic ties with Jordan (which had been broken off since 1970) seeing that it could lead to a political realignment of the region – namely into one less hostile towards Israel. Thus it was stated:

By choosing to rejoin the Arab mainstream and associate with “moderate” states such as Egypt and Jordan, Syria may be tacitly opting for the benefits which might accrue from a negotiated settlement to the Middle East problem...there are also unsubstantiated reports that by being increasingly reasonable and repairing her relations with Jordan, Syria stands to gain increased financial support from Saudi Arabia.<sup>363</sup>

Such actions, including increased clampdowns on the fedayeen movement were interpreted by the State Department as Syria's growing willingness to put national interests first before the interests of its ideological allies, and by extension a greater willingness to reach a

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<sup>360</sup> Memo, Seelye to Joe Sisco, 1973, File 76D451, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>361</sup> For example, Syria's detention in 1972 since 9 September of Major Richard H. Barratt, the US Assistant Army Attaché to Amman.

<sup>362</sup> The sale of military equipment was increasingly connected to the possibility of ameliorating the 'plight' of Syrian Jews, an issue raised vociferously by domestic US lobby groups, as a way of strengthening the argument in favour of the sale.

<sup>363</sup> Memo, Edward Djerejian to Atherton, 5/10/1973, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

settlement with its ideological foes. It would seem that they anticipated that with a Syrian-Israeli agreement, Syria would eventually follow a non-ideological path, just as they were to witness with Egypt after the 1973 war. This in itself reflects a key motivation behind any political engagement by the Americans – any political compromises in the Arab-Israeli conflict were expected from the Syrian side, rather than the Israeli side. Notably, no mention was made about the potential return of the Golan Heights as a result of Syria's increased cooperation.

There are three further questions that can be raised from here. Firstly, how significant was the change in Syria's policies since the arrival of Asad, and how great was the potential for greater cooperation at this stage? Secondly, was the State Department accurate in its view that the Syrian government was indeed becoming increasingly pragmatic and therefore less ideological and willing to thaw the ice in US-Syrian relations, which had especially developed since the 1967 War? Thirdly, given the State Department was so keen to increase the level of US economic assistance to Syria, why did this ultimately stall on the American side?

Firstly, the conciliatory overtures by Asad's government were indeed highly significant in the context of Syria's recent and indeed long-term history. Given that there had been no formal diplomatic relations between Syria and the US under the Ba'athist regime prior to Asad's presidency, and given the extent of Syria's hostility towards the US and its opposition towards resolution 242 – albeit minimal in its eventual impact – the pragmatic shift under Asad marked a critical period for US-Syrian relations that contained the potential for substantial engagement and dialogue between the two states. In the post-1967 political stalemate between Syria and the US, it was Syria that made the first move towards engagement with the Americans. This move was made, it should be remembered, without Syria receiving any assurances about the return of the Golan Heights or indeed a resolution of any of the issues affecting the Arabs.

Secondly, let us assess the State Department's prognosis of the Syrian government and its suggested policies for greater economic collaboration. Most of the literature looking at this period of US-Syrian relations follows the view of the State Department that Syria's increased pragmatism under Asad would lead to a gradual abandonment of its ideological fervour and opposition to Israel. However, I contend that: a) the State Department was over-optimistic in its belief that through greater economic relations, the US could sway Syrian

policies in the political field; and b) its high level of expectation from the Syrians in fact jeopardised the prospects for dialogue. The use of economic and financial assistance as both a political and ideological tool was a recurring aspect in US foreign policy. However, what the US State Department arguably did not consider was the extent to which Syria also shared America's appreciation for the value and power of economic aid.

However peripheral a goal it sometimes became in its policies, Syria's links with socialism, as well as its observance of the cosy relationship between some of its conservative oil-rich Arab neighbours and the west, meant that Syria remained wary about accepting widespread assistance beyond what it felt it urgently needed – especially assistance with political conditions attached. Indeed the consistent element in Syrian policies was its caution in incurring any debts to other nations. Hence the US even acknowledged that Syria had always faithfully paid off its debts to the US.<sup>364</sup> Syria's historical and ideological perspective held that to be indebted to other countries risked the loss of independence, and a long-term obligation to repay those debts not only financially, but also politically. This was reflected by the Syrian governments during the 1940s and 50s even before the Ba'thist regime.<sup>365</sup> Crucially, this caution over receiving economic *aid* did not mean Syria was not willing to enter into substantial *trade*, provided it would not be indebted to another state. Even after the US refused the sale of military equipment, and even when relations began to deteriorate again, Syria notably persisted in its requests to *purchase* weapons from the US.<sup>366</sup> For Syria, the wish to buy weapons from the US reflected a strategic need to restore military parity to the region, and to particularly rectify the military imbalance between Syria and Israel that was so obviously exposed during the 1967 War. Hence requests for increased American trade from the Syrians can in fact be seen as a continued commitment to its ideological goals and opposition towards Israel. In this sense, the State Department were too presumptuous about the implications of Asad's increased pragmatism.

Moreover, it can be argued that American expectations and demands for Syria on the back of this increased pragmatism were unrealistic, failing to take account of the entrenched nature of Syrian opposition towards Israeli policies, and as a result this acted as a disincentive for further cooperation on the Syrian side. The State Department's willingness to engage more with the Syrians was based on the belief and expectation that Syria should have to make the

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<sup>364</sup> Memo, Seelye to Joe Sisco, 1973, File 76D451, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>365</sup> See chapter 3 for more detail on this.

<sup>366</sup> Memo of conversation, Khaddam and Kissinger, 26/2/1974, Middle East trip follow-up, RG 59, Briefing Books 1958-1976, Lot#75D146, Middle East Trip Follow Up 5/1974, Box 205.

whole shift towards the US and Israeli positions, without any reciprocal movement the other way. On the face of it, the Americans claimed to recognise the need for ‘dialogue’ to stem the ‘Syrians’ ability to play a spoiling role’ in the region,<sup>367</sup> but it would appear that their understanding of the purpose of dialogue was to convince and convert the Syrians to a pro-western position. Arguably in diplomatic terms, the point of dialogue is to be a two-way process of compromise and sacrifice. The mismatch in their relative objectives for dialogue meant that conditions were ripe for increased frustration from both the Syrian and American sides and a growing perception that the other party was not genuinely interested in compromise.

Finally, we come to the question of Nixon’s objection to the sale of military equipment to the Syrians, despite the initially positive views of the State Department on increased economic trade. One possible argument is that Nixon recognised more accurately the long-term motives of the Syrian regime and the unlikelihood that it would substantially alter its policy towards the US and Israel without major demands of its own that the US could not meet. This argument, however, is unlikely. The State Department had a greater awareness and grasp of Syria’s position than the President’s office, which was traditionally far more conscious of domestic factors. The State Department did in fact express reservations about Asad’s ability to manoeuvre given a number of constraints at the domestic level – they argued that ‘Syria is experiencing a moment of frustration’ (as surmised by the Italian ambassador) because President Asad was:

inclined toward moderation but there are various forces at work which could prevent Asad from cooperating in the peace effort; the Army, the radicals and others seem to be unhappy with the cease-fire and to favour more fighting. Asad wants to do what Sadat did but is torn between various segments of Syrian society.<sup>368</sup>

First of all, it cannot be ascertained from such a document that Asad really did want to imitate Sadat in striking a truce, eventually, with the Israelis and the US. This notion is contradicted by the documents on US-Syrian discussions in the contentious year ahead, and it also demonstrates ignorance of Asad’s suspicions about Sadat and the direction he was taking at this stage. But even so, in the unlikely scenario that he *did* seek to sign a truce with Israel, the documents once again suggest that the Syrian leadership had to consider the sentiments and political outlook of various sectors of Syrian society. Indeed, US officials

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<sup>367</sup> Memo, Norman Pratt to Korn, Djerejian, 9/11/1973, File: Political Relations, Syria/US, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>368</sup> Memo, meeting with Italian Ambassadors and State Department, including David Korn, Roger Davies and Charles K. Johnson 16/11/1973, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

seemed surprised to find ‘conservative, highly pro-western Syrian[s]’ in line with the general popular mood against Israel and the US’s ‘harsh’ attitude towards Syria.<sup>369</sup> This supports the argument that collectively, Syria’s foreign policy at this time was shaped by ideological motives – whether these motives were held by the regime, or domestic constituents who influenced the regime.

However, while these may have been the dilemmas faced on the Syrian side, they do not adequately explain the hesitation on the Americans’ part to engage more closely with Syria. To understand the President’s primary concerns we need to look to the internal politics in the US. Throughout the deliberations of whether military sales should go ahead or not, the most important factor for Nixon, and acting as the major obstacle to agreeing such a deal, was the likely reaction not just of Israel but particularly the Israeli lobby in the US towards the sale.<sup>370</sup> A change in policy had been proposed and constantly stalled since 1969 due to ongoing problems between Syria and Israel. Back then, a TWA aircraft to Damascus was hijacked shortly before the recommendations were to be made by the State Department, while the Syrian government was judged to be ‘conducting itself in such an improper fashion’ by holding two Israelis, that the time was not yet right to press for a policy change.<sup>371</sup>

However, since then, and even after Syria’s conciliatory gestures since Asad came to power, the matter continued to face obstacles due to the way American sale of items to Syria would appear to the Israelis. Though Nixon was emotionally ambivalent about Israel, not carrying the same loyalty that his predecessors (or indeed his Secretary of State) felt, he was nevertheless beholden to the sentiments of the US Congress, which was still very much in favour of Israel.<sup>372</sup> Thus the negative coverage that such a transaction - and indeed any example of greater US-Syrian cooperation - might have generated at home amongst the Israeli lobby groups and with Israel itself was a major contributing factor in America’s policy towards the Syrians.

It was in this context of frustrated Syrian efforts to engage more closely with the US in the hope of progress in the peace settlement that Syria and Egypt embarked on the 1973 War

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<sup>369</sup> Letter, N. Pratt to B. Baas, 4/11/1969, File: Strategic Trade Control, Syria 1973. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>370</sup> Memo, Seelye to Sisco, 17/1/1972, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>371</sup> Letter, Bryan Baas to N. Pratt, 24/11/1969, File: Strategic Trade Control, Syria 1973, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>372</sup> Kissinger, *Upheaval*, 202-4

against Israel. The main objectives behind this move were to regain land, rehabilitate their reputation and to restore greater parity to the heavily skewed balance of power in the region. Military action was deemed necessary by the Syrians and the Egyptians because the Arabs had so little to bargain with, while their military and strategic inferiority meant they had no way of forcing Israel to the negotiating table. Some level of parity was needed before Israel could be made to see any need for a settlement, given that the post-1967 status-quo suited them very well; moreover through conflict, Syria and Egypt intended to show the US that they were serious players in any negotiation process and still retained political and military agency.

## 4.6 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to highlight the significance of this historical period and its constitutive effect on US-Syrian relations thereafter. It reflected the importance of both structural factors (regional insecurity, colonial legacy) and agency, chiefly Asad's personal and historical ties to ideology, which formed his political principles and goals, but also the role of individuals in effecting policy in neighbouring Arab states, Israel and the US. The chapter demonstrated how both structure and agency inform, but also are shaped, by ideas, which in turn become embedded and institutionalised within state policy and among public opinion. This could be seen from both Syrian and American positions towards Israel and each other.

At the start of the period under scrutiny here, the US heavily favoured Israel in military armaments before and during the 1967 war – this continued with a one-sided arms embargo against the Arab states that did not extend to Israel. Through Syria's subsequent reactions towards the US, and the crystallisation of US negative perceptions of Syrian obstructionism, it is possible to identify this as a period when US-Syrian hostility became especially pronounced and continued along this trajectory for decades to follow. The failure of the US and indeed the international community (via the UN) to expel Israel from the occupied territories and apply any sanctions, enforced the notion of Israel's impunity after breaching international law.

Following the war, the US made a crucial policy change in which they no longer sought equilibrium between the Arabs and Israel, but instead decided to give their support to one side, creating a military disparity in the region and also placating domestic Israeli lobby groups. By building up Israel's military and strategic position, the US aimed to take war off the agenda despite fostering Arab resentment, as well as furthering US economic and strategic objectives against the USSR. The US also diluted the UN's stipulation for unconditional withdrawal of land occupied during war: by demanding safeguards for Israel's security as a *precondition* before the return of Arab territories, the US was arguably legitimising Israeli occupation as a strategic option, despite the illegality of occupation via settlement under international law. This altered Israel's game plan, who recognised that the status-quo was now in its favour – thus obstruction and delays of any settlement suited its own interests and became a favoured tactic whenever negotiations threatened to extract Israeli concessions.



The post-war situation also saw the US develop a second crucial and lasting policy, that of Separate Peace. In favouring a piecemeal approach to the region's problems, it directly contradicted Syria's interests and ideological vision for a comprehensive peace settlement. This was facilitated in no small part by the Arab states themselves- the Jordanians' lack of commitment to any ideological goals for example, as well as the transitional nature of the Egyptian regime. Thus Syrian hostility towards both the US and Israel stood out amongst other Arab states. Syria was the only state to reject UNSCR 242, on a point of principle. Syrians were also especially aggrieved by the unbalanced arms embargo which prevented Arabs from matching Israel's military power. And finally the fact that no movement was made by the US to address the occupation of the Golan Heights, while Egypt and Jordan both had more American attention and sympathy, further fuelled Syrian hostility towards the US for its perceived hypocrisy in the enforcement of international law.

Asad came to power in a period of turmoil both within Syria and in the wider region. Both via his style of leadership and clear changes in policy, Asad shifted Syria onto a more pragmatic course, but one which was not necessarily less ideological. The main concessions Syria granted the US was the late acceptance of 242 and the request for increased Syrian-American trade, especially in military equipment. While the US State Department were certainly responsive, they were ultimately too optimistic about changing Syria's position through economic aid and failed to successfully make the case to the President for an American rapprochement with Syria. The President's office, on the other hand, was to become greatly preoccupied by domestic issues such as the Watergate scandal. Thus criticisms by the Israeli lobby at home carried even more weight and turned out to be rather influential in preventing the US from improving its ties with Syria. Thus by the end of this period, Syria's conciliatory gestures remained unreciprocated by the US, who continued to impose isolation on the Syrians. Being outsiders to the peace process engendered a deep sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with America's role as mediators in the region; however, such sentiments merely worsened after Syria's eventual inclusion into the process of negotiations, as will be explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

### US-Syrian Engagement: Disengagement Talks 1973 - 75

The last two chapters focused on the emergence and entrenchment of US-Syrian hostility, and greater estrangement between the states. In contrast these next two chapters will focus on the theme of engagement between Syria and the US. The chapter assesses the strategies of negotiation, the separate motives and perceptions, as well as the pressures – both internal and external – faced by both America and Syria in these times; it also looks at why negotiations ultimately stalled and failed to produce better relations between the two states. The chapter focuses on the Disengagement negotiations from 1973-75, drawing upon primary sources from US archive and interviews. This is an important and influential period for it set the tone not only for future negotiations between Syria and the US but also had a lasting impact on the Middle East landscape and set in train unlikely alliances and deep fissures between the states in the region. A number of questions that were highlighted in the introduction of the thesis will be addressed in this section, these being: what were US demands of Syria in the negotiations, and how reasonable or realistic were they? Did the US have fixed perceptions of Syrian intransigence – and to what extent did this factor as well as America's relationship with Israel hinder opportunities for peace? Was Syria obstructing the peace process? And why has Syria not followed Egypt in signing a truce with Israel and forming a close alliance with the US?

Before beginning this analysis it is important to highlight the prevailing discourse and historiography on the roles of both the US and Syria during this period. An influential argument is that Syria played the role of a spoiler – unwilling due to its radical ideology to compromise with the US, unwilling to even acknowledge the existence of Israel, and instead intent on obstructing other states from making peace.<sup>373</sup> According to this viewpoint, Syria's goals were unrealistic and deliberately unattainable in order to scupper the chances for peace; its motives for perpetuating conflict have been attributed to the regime's need to justify authoritarianism at home and an overbearing influence of the military, while some have argued that Syria was bowing to pressure from a belligerent public.<sup>374</sup>

This view is particularly strengthened when juxtaposed by the (apparent) willingness, and indeed success, of Egypt, Jordan and Israel to negotiate and reach settlements. By extension,

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<sup>373</sup> For example see Kissinger, *Upheaval*, 1048; Robert Rabil, *Embattled Neighbours, Syria, Israel and Lebanon*, Lynne Rienner, (2003), 24-25

<sup>374</sup> Fred Lawson, *Why Syria goes to war*.

the US' successful role in mediating lasting deals between those countries appears to demonstrate American neutrality and fairness. Syria, therefore, bears the brunt of responsibility for the failure to retrieve its lost land, for continued conflict with Israel and as a result bad relations with the US. The charge has often been, both within literature and also in policy circles, that Syria did not, and does not, do enough to secure peace – this marks a surprising degree of continuity in the views of Syria before and after Hafez Asad coming to power, the key difference being that ideology was replaced by self-interest and regime security as the prime motivation.<sup>375</sup>

This assessment is contested by what might be termed as revisionist historical accounts. Patrick Seale's biography of Asad provides an alternative analysis, in which he argues that the US had little intention of helping Syria to retrieve its land and sought to *avoid* a comprehensive peace settlement that would have safeguarded the rights of Palestinians.<sup>376</sup> This was not as a response to Syrian obstructionism, but rather it was a position determined long before negotiations began. Seale argues that America's, and particularly Henry Kissinger's, primary goal was to support Israel's interests, and by undermining the Arab nationalist movement to also kick out Soviet influence in the region. Egypt, he argues, rather than acting as pragmatic peacemakers had in fact been too idealistic in its expectations of what the US could deliver. According to this view, the Syrian-Israeli track failed because of a 'duplicious' American strategy, Israeli intransigence and Egyptian weakness.<sup>377</sup> Seale relies on interviews with key players in those negotiations, records of diplomatic cables and in particular Kissinger's own memoirs. This chapter will support this argument, using documentary evidence that had not yet been released when Seale wrote his account. This supplementary primary material will further strengthen and develop the revisionist case. In this analysis I will pay particular attention to the roles of four key actors in the eventual failure of a Syrian-Israeli settlement which has had lasting repercussions for US-Syrian relations: Syria, America, Israel and Egypt.

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<sup>375</sup> Author's interview with Eliot Abrams, Washington DC, June 2009; interview with Andrew Tabler, May 2009.

<sup>376</sup> See Seale's 'Asad the struggle for the Middle East', and the chapter: The October Illusion pg 202-225, for an excellent exposition of the war. It details the extent of American collusion with Israel to ensure Israel ended the war with the upper hand, as well as weakening the Arab states as much as possible before the start of negotiations. It also highlights the lethargy of Soviet support. And finally it explains how the seeds of Asad's mistrust of Sadat were sown, based on cables and documents remaining from the war.

<sup>377</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 248

## 5.1 The US and Syria: Perceptions, Goals and Strategies

The previous historical chapter took us to the eve of the 1973 war between Egypt, Syria and Israel. The war was a result of the deadlock that followed the 1967 war. It had been a devastating defeat for the Arabs: with Israel occupying and settling on captured Arab lands, and content with the status quo, the Arabs had little to no bargaining power in any peace process in order to retrieve their land and restore military and political balance in the region. With resolution 242 still not enacted by Israel, Syria and Egypt launched a military attack on Israel on 6 October 1973 to rebalance the disadvantage. Despite gains at the start of the war, and though the war served to challenge the notion of Israel's invincibility, the Arab armies were ultimately pushed back by Israel's counter-offensive, having to relinquish the Sinai and Golan, and suffering many casualties.

On 24 October 1973 Egypt agreed to a ceasefire without securing any Israeli commitments to withdrawal and without consulting with Asad, which forced Syria to follow suit since it could not have fought the war alone.<sup>378</sup> This fragile ceasefire was to be followed up with a multilateral conference to be held in Geneva under UN auspices to enable talks among all parties and ratification of agreements. While it had often been the case that Syria followed Egypt's lead in foreign policy issues, on this occasion the ceasefire proved to be a highly controversial decision and was met with widespread opposition in Syria, particularly among the public and the military.<sup>379</sup> Syrians felt that the Arabs had more to gain if the war was prolonged, which in turn would have vastly strengthened their hand not only in negotiations but in the region's overall balance of power. Moreover, Asad felt that the American-contrived ceasefire was not merely a cessation of hostilities by all parties (which Israel reneged on anyway by continuing to fight on the Egyptian front), but in fact ensured that the war ended in Israel's favour and on American terms.<sup>380</sup> In Syria's eyes, the end of the war might bring Israel to the negotiating table, but it had done nothing to force Israel to relinquish the Arab territories it had occupied since 1967 as was the original aim – the potential advantages that might have been accrued from the war had thus been significantly limited.

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Memo, Norman Pratt to Korn, Djerejian, 9/11/1973, File: Political Relations, Syria/US, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>380</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 219-224

This was, at first glance, less the case for Egypt, who stood a much better chance of regaining the Sinai – as Kissinger affirmed the Sinai was of far less strategic value to the Israelis than the Golan Heights, while Sadat was also showing greater signs of cooperation with the US.<sup>381</sup> Sadat had already made agreements for a cease-fire in the Suez Canal and accepted intervention of the UN Emergency Force, paving the way for the return of Israeli POWs. Despite Asad's increased pragmatism, conciliatory gestures towards the US, and concessions prior to the war, the US still felt he had not gone far enough. Thus progress on an Egyptian-Israeli settlement was pushed with far greater intent and effort by the Americans.

Little had changed, then, in America's perceptions of Syria. The US still viewed Syria as being of less importance than the other parties just as they had in 1967. As seen in the last chapter, America's approach had been to isolate Syria and largely to ignore Syrian demands and grievances. To an extent this was in response to the high levels of hostility towards the US amongst the Syrian public, media and politicians that followed the war. But it was also based on deeply set perceptions and assumptions about Syrian radicalism and intransigence that seemed to make dialogue redundant in the view of the US.<sup>382</sup>

As had been the case previously, the US initially felt the onus of engagement should remain firmly with the Syrians, saving the US from having to make difficult concessions to bring them into negotiations. They expected Syria would come to this decision themselves because of two key developments:

(1) With Egypt re-establishing diplomatic relations with the US, and establishing an Egyptian-Israeli agreement on the implementation of a cease-fire (under US auspices), it was hoped that it would have a domino effect on Syria. Norman Pratt expressed this view stating that Syria had a 'habit of taking its foreign policy lead from Egypt'.<sup>383</sup> Egypt's resumption of relations with the US was seen as providing Syria with greater flexibility with its people to do the same.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Quandt describes Sadat as 'emphatic' in wanting to work with the US for a peace settlement after the war: William B. Quandt, *Peace Process*, (University of California Press 2005), 125

<sup>382</sup> See chapter 4 by author

<sup>383</sup> Memo, Norman Pratt to Korn, Djerejian, 9/11/1973, File: Political Relations, Syria/US, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>384</sup> To a certain extent this was also encouraged by the Egyptians – see David Hirst and Irene Beeson, *Sadat*, (Faber 1981), 173: Ismail Fahmy was reported to have told the Americans at a banquet: 'if you win the friendship of Egypt you win the friendship of the Arab world.'

(2) The US was relying on Syria's fears of being isolated amidst these developments with an Arab-Israeli peace that excluded them.<sup>385</sup> This seemed to be supported by Syria's delayed acceptance of UN resolution 242, and eventual acceptance of 338 which marked the end of the October War. Given that these developments occurred without any American engagement, they now saw the merits of allowing Syria to persist with its fears of isolation so that it would feel compelled to follow Egypt, rather than building on the nascent dialogue that was started after Asad came to power. Thus it was stated:

Strategically, I assume the US continues to desire restoration of relations with all Arab States, including Syria. On the tactical level, however, I see advantage in letting the next move be that of the Syrians towards the US which appears probable as a result of these old fears. Thus any new negotiations should begin at the initiation of the Syrians, and around a larger package of conditions (given the likelihood that Syria would try to cut them down through bargaining), rather than the other way round.<sup>386</sup>

This lack of American urgency in addressing Syria's issues was reflected in the US-Soviet discussions for an overall settlement in the Middle East, which took place on 1 October 1973. There the Egyptian front (a return to the former international border), and the Jordanian front (i.e. the 1949 armistice line) were agreed upon and arrangements were made for Jerusalem to be an open, unified city. But they took 'no position on the Syrian border, since Syria was not a negotiating party in the Jarring talks, nor had it [initially] accepted SC Resolution 242'.<sup>387</sup> Notably, the Soviet Union, despite its strong alliance with Syria, did not push for discussions on the Golan Heights. As a result, Syria's future was not even discussed at these talks. The earlier rejection of UNSC 242 by the Jadid regime had greatly prejudiced the US against Syria's intentions and capacity for peace, despite the change of regime, the openness to dialogue under Asad and the acceptance by 1973 of both resolutions 242 and 338. This was a lesson of non-reciprocation that Asad learned quite soon into his presidency. Egypt had also entered into war against Israel in 1973, effectively breaching 242, yet both they and the Jordanians had entered Peace negotiations before the end of the year, receiving very different treatment from the US. In turn, a growing ambivalence towards US-led negotiations began to take root in Syria.

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<sup>385</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria's position on UN Resolution 338 and a peace conference, File: Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>386</sup> Memo, Norman Pratt to Korn, Djerejian, 9/11/1973, File: Political Relations, Syria/US, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>387</sup> Summary, US-Soviet discussions, 1/10/1973, File: Kissinger's visit to Middle East 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

Thus it soon became apparent to the Americans that their predictions and policies towards Syria had been miscalculated.<sup>388</sup> The view that Syria would follow Egypt had to be reassessed, for it showed no signs of doing so. At this time Egypt was moving ahead with the US in its bilateral relations, placing greater pressure on Syria. Egypt already signed agreements in late November 1973 with EXXON and Mobil for offshore oil prospecting in the Middle East, involving around \$75 million in investments by companies over a number of years. US oil industries had already invested about \$200 million in their Egyptian operations. The US also made available \$500,000 in Egyptian pounds for use by the ICRC and Egyptian Red Crescent, and gave a further \$1 million for further US assistance-aid after war.<sup>389</sup> These financial rewards can be explained by Egypt's compliance (particularly in comparison to Syria's stance) over disengagement plans. Notably during Egypt's bilateral talks with the US and disengagement arrangements with Israel, there was no mention at all of the Golan Heights or the plight of the Palestinians. It focused squarely on Egyptian national interests. And even then Egypt had, it appeared to many, sold *itself* short – the '6 point agreement' that the Egyptians and Israelis had settled on came under severe criticism from Egypt's own public and its neighbours, not least because Egypt was willing to accept it fully while Israel set about implementing it only selectively.<sup>390</sup>

There were enough financial and security incentives here for a weak state like Syria to follow Egypt's example. And yet, rather than being swayed by Egypt, Syria was one of its greatest critics.<sup>391</sup> The State Department's optimism that Egypt's policies would facilitate a cooling of Syrian hostility towards the American-Israeli relationship was also misplaced, as it discovered when it claimed Syria acted like 'Cold War Communists' and saw the US as the: 'promoter of Zionist-imperialist conspiracies; armer and supporter of Israeli expansionism; the dedicated enemy of the Arabs'.<sup>392</sup> The prediction that Syria would naturally follow in Egypt's conciliatory footsteps was therefore not as accurate or straightforward as it had initially seemed.

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<sup>388</sup> In support of this Quandt argues that 'only gradually did Kissinger come to perceive Syria's importance', *Peace Process*, 133

<sup>389</sup> Briefing paper, Kissinger's Middle East trip, 13-17 December 1973, File: Secretary's visit to Egypt, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>390</sup> Telegram, Cairo to Washington, 2/12/1973, Briefing paper, Kissinger's Middle East trip, 13-17 December 1973, File: Secretary's visit to Egypt, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180. And also see Quandt, who argues Kissinger was surprised at Sadat's agreement to the plan - 137

<sup>391</sup> Telegram, Cairo to Washington, 2/12/1973, Briefing paper, Kissinger's Middle East trip, 13-17 December 1973, File: Secretary's visit to Egypt, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>392</sup> SD Briefing paper, Syria, December 1973, File: Visit of Secretary Kissinger to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973. Box 180-3

In addition to this realisation, it became apparent that Syria did not fear isolation enough to rush into negotiations. Indeed, while it was not the strongest or biggest actor in the region, the US better understood Syria's ability to affect regional alignments and chance for peace in the region. The view that Syria was dispensable in regional affairs was thus changing:

[Of the] three Arab combatants, Syria has been the most intransigent and the least anxious to travel the path of peace. If it remains so, Syria could- at the very least seriously complicate the task of bringing peace to the Middle East, for Egyptian and Jordanian leaders will feel inhibitions about settling with Israel in the absence of Syria.<sup>393</sup>

The US now feared that instead of being pressured to follow Egypt, Syria could be swayed back into a more radical position possibly influencing other Arab states, given the mood of the country and the 'delusion and isolation' it was feeling.<sup>394</sup> There were two key forthcoming events at which Syria could exercise this influence - the Arab Summit, and the UN Summit in Geneva. Both summits were significant in that they would provide a collective forum to discuss the situation in the Middle East. With so many parties involved, these summits had the potential to either lay down a comprehensive peace settlement that everyone could work with, or they could result in greater deadlock and polarisation of views. Both America and Israel were not in favour of such summits which could also be used by each faction to rally more countries around their cause. Israel felt it stood a much greater chance of getting what it wanted and to dilute Arab demands through bilateral discussions;<sup>395</sup> the US concurred, seeing the advantages of taking the lead in shuttle diplomacy where it could direct the discussion, revealing or holding back information where necessary, rather than getting the parties to meet directly.

Given that the summits could not be cancelled, and given that America's strategy for 'separate peace' in the region now seemed at stake, the US recognised that greater effort needed to be exerted to bring the Syrians in line with Egypt's position *prior* to the two summits. But if this could not be secured beforehand, the US feared Syria would act as spoilers during the Geneva conference.

Thus the US was forced to change its strategy. Clearly the Syrians were in no mood to initiate yet further concessions for the Americans, but nor could they be ignored: Syria had

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Memo, Norman Pratt to Korn, Djerejian, 9/11/1973, File: Political Relations, Syria/US, DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>395</sup> Melvin A. Friedlander, *Sadat and Begin*, (Westview Press 1983), .28



to be engaged bilaterally and more directly through diplomacy initiated by the Americans. Thus began the start of Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy.

### **5.1.1 Kissinger's visit to Damascus**

Dr. Henry Kissinger the US Secretary of State embarked on a tour of the Middle East in the December of 1973. Kissinger had adopted a greater personal role in international affairs than his predecessors, and came to have a high degree of influence in US foreign policy, particularly as President Nixon became mired in the Watergate affair. Kissinger took a personal interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict, not only, as he acknowledged, because of his Jewish roots and deeply felt connection with Israel, but also because of its impact on American interests.<sup>396</sup> He was to play a significant role in the outcome of negotiations and the region's politics for years to come.

With his Middle East tour, the US sought to forward a disengagement process between Syria and Israel along similar lines of the Egyptian-Israeli process. From Syria's perspective, attention to this issue was long overdue; but from the US perspective, they merely wanted to eliminate those issues that could 'imperil' the Geneva Conference.<sup>397</sup> These issues were that: Israel was refusing to 'sit with the Syrians' until they provided a full list of Israeli POWs and agreed for them to receive Red Cross visitations; Secondly, Syria had set its preconditions that: 1) Israel should return to the 22 October lines; 2) that it should agree to abide by the Geneva Convention on the non-transfer of population to occupied territory (such as the Israeli Golan Height settlements); and 3) that 15,000 displaced Syrian villagers must be repatriated.<sup>398</sup> On Syria's part, these were key points of contention that it felt had been sidelined in the search for a more short-term peace settlement. Despite Syria's consistent demands, the US persisted with the line that the Syrian position remained unclear<sup>399</sup> – this became a recurring theme which served to portray the Syrians as ambiguous and indecisive and indeed propped up the perception that their demands were neither rational nor negotiable.

To persuade Syria to at least embark on a disengagement process, Kissinger paid a visit to Damascus in December 1973 – this represented the first visit from a Secretary of State since Dulles' visit in 1953. For Asad and his advisors, this was the first time they were to meet a

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<sup>396</sup> Kissinger, *Upheaval*, 203.

<sup>397</sup> Briefing paper, Kissinger's Middle East trip, 13-17 December 1973, File: Secretary's visit to Egypt, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

senior US official at all, such had been the level of estrangement between the two states. This marked a rare example where the US did not underestimate the importance of the trip. Prior to travelling, Kissinger was briefed that his visit to Damascus would ‘in many ways be the most challenging and one of the most important of the stops on your current Middle East itinerary’, and was warned that the Syrians ‘will be forming first-hand impressions which will be of lasting importance’.<sup>400</sup> Moreover on the Syrian side, it was another example of the change undergone by the Syrian regime – the very fact that Asad was willing to receive Kissinger in Syria for talks showed their genuine interest in reaching a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was the nature of that resolution that was to become the cause of contention between Syria and the US, not the need for a resolution itself.

While the importance of Asad’s role in making Syria a credible party in negotiations was recognised by the US, they remained conflicted in their views of Syria and arguably found it difficult to move beyond time-worn perceptions about the Syrians. In briefing Kissinger the State Department stated that the Syrians, due to their military background, were not suited to negotiation or inclined to compromise; and yet they highlighted Asad’s ‘flexibility and sense of realism...in contrast to the more ideological approach of some other members of the ruling elite’.<sup>401</sup> This reflects a confusion over the Syrian regime’s approach and how best to deal with them.

Prior to the visit, Kissinger set out with the following aims for his talks with the Syrians:

1. To ensure that the Syrians understood how the peace conference in Geneva would proceed, and that the US appreciated its views.
2. Convey America’s views on how the peace process must proceed if it was to work.
3. Build a relationship of trust and confidence with the Syrian leaders, thus making it possible for the US to ‘*talk to and influence them* as peace negotiations proceed’.
4. Encourage a ‘*pragmatic*’ Syrian approach to negotiation on territorial matters and Palestinian representation at the Peace conference.
5. Move Syrians towards agreement with Israel on the exchange of POWs, if progress on the other fronts was not made.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> SD Briefing paper, Syria, December 1973, File: Visit of Secretary Kissinger to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973. Boxes 180-83

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

In terms of what should be on the agenda during the talks, the US identified four topics. (1) To gauge Syrian views on total Israeli withdrawal and the rights of Palestinians. (2) To apply pressure on Syria to return the Israeli POWs since nothing could move forward without this, reminding them that Egypt had already done this. (3) To discuss the possibilities of having a permanent Syrian diplomat in Washington rather than intermediaries. And (4) to discuss the return of two US citizens, detained by Syria on charges of espionage for Israel in 1972.

The general thrust of both the aims and the agenda for the US-Syrian meeting could be summed up as being focused on Israeli demands for POW return, conveying prearranged plans for how the Geneva conference should run and what it should achieve (the subtext being that there were no alternative plans), building Syrian trust of the US in order to boost America's influence over them, and finally to discuss Syria's demands - not to take them into consideration, but in order to persuade them otherwise. While diplomacy necessarily involves the art of persuasion to win over the other party to one's own position, it ought to be remembered that the US was playing the role not of an opponent in this situation, but supposedly a neutral mediator. There is very little evidence here to suggest that the US was attempting to consider the demands and 'red-lines' of both Israel and Syria in equal terms, and to then seek a point of mutual compromise. Rather the point of the discussions was to persuade and pressurise Syria to move towards a settled US position – it helped the Americans to present it as the 'middle ground' now that Egypt had seemingly been won over to it, but in reality the expected compromises were mostly one-sided.

The chances for success during these talks appear to have been limited from the start given that America's aims hardly matched up to Syrian objectives before the talks. This would become a common theme behind US-Syrian negotiations, where the gulf between their respective goals was too great to enable significant progress. In this instance, Syria's aims were: (1) to assess how willing the US was to support Arab demands for full Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders, as stipulated in resolutions 242, 338 and the Geneva Convention; (2) to emphasise their demands for the satisfaction of Palestinian rights, and the potential and willingness for ongoing conflict if these demands were not met.<sup>403</sup>

Syria's demands had arguably not changed since the 1967 war, and indeed with regards to the Palestinians' situation Syria's position had not changed since 1948. Thus what the US

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

termed as inflexible and intransigent, was a consistency of political demands that had not yet been addressed with any seriousness, or purpose, by the US. For the Syrians, it was hard to see why they should compromise on those basic demands which tallied with international law when there was no evidence of compromise forthcoming from the Israelis. From the military perspective that the Syrian government were rooted in, war had been demonstrated to be a necessary tool by which balance of power was maintained and unruly states could be kept in check; peace settlements on the other hand were supposed to prolong and embed stability and non-belligerence when both had been achieved by all parties. It served little purpose to pursue a settlement, therefore, if neither of those conditions had been achieved. As the Syrians saw it, the Palestinians were still suffering the consequences of 1948 – without territory and still living as refugees – while Israel still occupied land from three Arab states taken in 1967, and remained notably ambivalent about the likelihood of their return even after a peace settlement.<sup>404</sup>

It is evident from the documentary records that the US saw bringing Syria into negotiations as instrumental to their own interests and the aims they had for other states<sup>405</sup> – US-Syrian talks were not intended to secure any concrete settlements for Syria itself. Thus should the talks fail to produce any satisfactory resolution for Syria, this was not going to trouble the US. Indeed, the intervening years between the two wars had provided the US with an interesting insight into Syria's role – not only the extent to which it could play a spoiler role, which the US now recognised should be avoided,<sup>406</sup> but also the extent to which Syria's arm was limited. It could not, for example, ignite war on its own, or attack Israel without first assuring support from its neighbours. Kissinger's observation that 'you could not make war without Egypt, but you could not make peace without Syria' was, in this context, rather accurate. The US was forming the calculation, one that would influence its policy for many years, that if it failed to deliver any of Syria's demands, the consequences would be minimal and need not scupper US or Israeli interests, both of which could still be pursued via the separate peace strategy. The key factor in this calculation was the extensive compliance of other Arab states, such as Egypt and Jordan, which would consolidate Syria's marginalisation. As long as the US was still unsure of Egypt and Jordan's long-term compliance, Syria was still needed in the process:

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<sup>404</sup> Hafez Asad, interviewed in: Arab Documents on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Winter, 1978

<sup>405</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria's position on UN Resolution 338 and a peace conference, File: Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

We can be sure that the Syrians will be the least reasonable and the most demanding of the three Arab states which are direct parties to conflict...Still it is in our interests to have them involved in the negotiations, if only because Syria could play a spoiling role to defeat any initiatives for a peaceful settlement by exerting political pressure on other Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan, to take a more militant stand vis-à-vis Israel, and at worst, by resuming hostilities.<sup>407</sup>

It is clear from the start of negotiations that the US had very little intention of securing a long-term Syrian-Israeli settlement but instead hoped to distract them from obstructing the other parties.<sup>408</sup> For if the US did not at least give the appearance that Syria was being engaged as well, both Egypt and Jordan might withdraw for fear of the criticism that would be levelled at them by the Syrians. In short, Syria's involvement was vital to retain the public credibility of negotiations, to satisfy onlookers that the US was being balanced and were considering the interests of all parties, and that other negotiating parties such as Egypt and Jordan were not 'selling out'.

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

## 5.2 Terms of Syrian-Israeli Disengagement and US-Syrian Rapprochement

None of these underlying motives were at the time known to the Syrians, and the US did succeed in bringing them to the negotiating table. Communication at a high-ranking level was finally established by Kissinger during his visit to Damascus in December 1973. In this time he began the process of shuttle diplomacy, and spent many hours in hard negotiations with both the Foreign Minister Abdul-Halim Khaddam and President Asad himself. Previously the US had privately commented on the ambiguity of Syria's demands, despite the fact that these had been stipulated on a regular basis and had remained consistent since the 1967 war. Lack of direct contact between the two states had always meant that it was easier for both parties to base assumptions and judgments on hearsay, without the urgency of verifying their positions. These direct talks, therefore, finally allowed the US to gauge at first hand Syria's position on the controversial cease-fire of the October War, Israel's demands for the return of POWs, and their own terms of agreement in any negotiation process.

Explaining their position, the Syrians stated that they were in a worse position vis-à-vis loss of territory and Israeli encroachment compared to Egypt – they had lost an additional 350 square miles of territory to Israel in addition to the land lost in 1967. Thus a cease-fire effectively meant a freeze on a situation that was highly favourable to Israel, making it even more difficult to explain the heavy losses incurred by the Syrian army to the Syrian people;<sup>409</sup> those losses would appear to have been in vain if there was not now a complete Israeli withdrawal. While not stated by the Syrian government, US officials observed this could pose a threat to the regime itself as dissident factions became restless.<sup>410</sup> Unlike Egypt, there had been no direct contact between Syria and Israel about the cease-fire terms or the exchange of POWs; indeed Syria took a tougher stance on the whole issue, stating that they were 'not interested in any type of partial arrangement such as the November 11 six-point Egyptian-Israeli agreement.' These, the Syrians felt, were half-baked agreements that gave Israel's encroachments a degree of legitimacy, when according to UN resolutions and the Geneva Convention they had little justification. Expressing this frustration at the lack of any compromise from Israel, the Syrian Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Mohammed Zakariya Ismail, stated in a meeting with Sisco and Kissinger:

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid. Also see Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 182

<sup>410</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria's position on UN Resolution 338 and a peace conference, File: Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180; Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 182

There are 19 Israeli settlements in Golan and Dayan and others have said that Golan is not negotiable, Jerusalem is not negotiable, Sharm el-Sheikh and the West Bank are not negotiable. How can they reconcile all these things with Resolution 242?<sup>411</sup>

He lamented that ‘everybody talks about the ceasefire on the Egyptian front but nobody mentions the problems on the Syrian front’, and decried the imbalance in which Israel demanded the return of POWs but refused to return the dead bodies of Syrian soldiers, once again in contravention of the Geneva Convention.<sup>412</sup>

A further grievance was America’s handling of the Palestinians. The Syrians learnt that the Americans had already settled the format of the Geneva Conference, having consulted the Egyptians. The Syrians, once again, had not been consulted. And in these arrangements it was decided that the US and the Soviet Union would participate as permanent members of the UNSC, along with the main military parties. There was, however, to be no Palestinian delegation. The Syrians expressed their surprise and opposition to this decision in clear terms to the Americans, and continued to challenge them vociferously on this front throughout the negotiation process.<sup>413</sup> Even more galling was the knowledge that Egypt had given the green light to this glaring omission.

Thus based on their positions on the above issues, the Syrians set the following conditions for there to be any possibility of moving forward in negotiations: a) approximately 100 Israeli POWs would only be exchanged after Israel withdrew to the 22 October lines (the day of the ceasefire, after which Israel still advanced into Syrian territory). Syria would only comply with international conventions on POWs if Israel complied with the Geneva convention (article 49 of the 4th Geneva convention);<sup>414</sup> b) Syria demanded the repatriation of 15,000 Syrians who had been displaced as a result of the war and Israeli seizure of territory;<sup>415</sup> c) Syria demanded the return of the bodies of dead Syrian soldiers, still held by the Israelis;<sup>416</sup> d) Syria demanded the inclusion of the Palestinians in the Geneva

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<sup>411</sup> Memo of conversation, meeting between Kissinger and Vice Foreign Minister to Syria, Ismail, 2/11/1973, Briefing Paper, Syria, File: Kissinger’s visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 182

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Syrian permanent mission to the UN, Haytham Kaylani, to Kissinger, memo of conversation, 21/11/1973, File: Kissinger’s visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 182

<sup>414</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria’s position on UN Resolution 338 and a peace conference, File: Kissinger’s visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

conference;<sup>417</sup> e) and finally, the end result of negotiations must be the ‘complete’ Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories and ‘safeguarding of the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people’.<sup>418</sup>

Asad had outlined Syria’s overall conditions succinctly in an earlier speech after the war, in which he reiterated that Syria had only accepted the ceasefire and Resolution 338 after Egypt and the Soviet Union had given assurances that Israel would have to withdraw from all occupied territories and the rights of the Palestinians would be restored.<sup>419</sup> Hence Syria made it clear in their negotiations with the US that they expected and sought no less than these outcomes, and would hold all parties to account of their earlier assurances. With regards to the Geneva Conference at the end of the talks, Syria made it clear that it was willing to participate but did not want to attend if their conditions had not been met, simply in order to ratify a peace plan that represented the interests of Israel. Hence they wanted some agreement with Israel on the above points before agreeing to send a delegation to the conference. Ironically, from the American perspective, it would have served their plans better if indeed Syria were *not* present at the conference, where they might potentially act as ‘spoilers’ – thus there was even less incentive for the US to pursue Syria’s demands rigorously.<sup>420</sup>

### **5.2.1 Compromise and Agreements**

Having determined what both parties’ original terms were, we can now look to what agreements were actually made, and the extent to which each side compromised their respective positions. Firstly, Syria did accept the ceasefire in the end, having held off throughout the winter of 1973. This enabled the negotiation process to proceed with a degree of stability. Secondly, Syria eventually did agree to provide a list of the Israeli POWs to Israel (65 of them altogether) and to allow them to receive Red Cross visitations from March 1974.<sup>421</sup> Thirdly, Syria agreed to compromise on the initial extent of Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights – having at first demanded that Israel withdraw to the October 22 lines, Asad later accepted the condition of Israeli withdrawal to the October 6

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<sup>417</sup> Syrian permanent mission to the UN, Haytham Kaylani, to Kissinger, memo of conversation, 21/11/1973, File: Kissinger’s visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 182

<sup>418</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria’s position on UN Resolution 338 and a peace conference, File: Kissinger’s visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

<sup>419</sup> President Asad’s speech on ceasefire, 29 October 1973, Damascus Domestic Service, File: Kissinger’s visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 182

<sup>420</sup> Telegram, Kissinger to Israeli Ambassador, File: Kissinger’s visit to Middle East, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 183

<sup>421</sup> Briefing Paper on Syria, February 1974, File: Visit to Syria 1974, Lot#75D146, Record Group 59, Box 198



lines.<sup>422</sup> These dates were significant, because until October 6, Israel had occupied Mount Hermon on the Golan, a strategic high-point that was of great military importance to both sides – after this date Syria recaptured Mount Hermon during the early phase of the war when they had a number of military successes; it was towards the end of the war (and notably after the official ceasefire, which was on 22 October) that those successes were reversed. Asad agreeing to drop the demand for the return of Mount Hermon as a precondition for negotiations, was therefore a major concession by the Syrians. Fourthly, Syria appointed Sabah Kabbani as Ambassador to the US on 16 June 1974, the first diplomatic channel to be established since 1967. The fifth and significant area of compromise came with Syria's acceptance of the first stage of a Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement, signed on 31 May 1974 in Geneva. This did not signal a truce – Syria was adamant the possibility of war should not be taken off the agenda, which would leave Israel unrestrained and unchecked to flex its muscles and dominate in the region. However, it was an agreement to retain the existing ceasefire, without which more long-term negotiations for a lasting peace settlement could not take place.

The Disengagement Agreement elicited some compromises from both the Syrian and Israeli sides. It stipulated that both sides maintain the cessation of military hostilities as initiated by Resolution 338 on 22 October 1973. It also implemented the separation of Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights, demarcating two separate boundaries, with a neutral demilitarized zone in between, which stationed the United Nations Disengagement Observer Forces (UNDOF). The Eastern boundary marked Syrian territory – this incorporated a 650 km strip of recovered territory through the agreement. But beyond this, no further land occupied since 1967 was returned to Syria, and this was to become the status quo. Finally, according to the agreement, all POWs and bodies of dead soldiers were to be returned by both sides.

While some of Syria's demands had been met, this was still far short of the mark. There was no mention of the return of displaced civilians, there had not been a full withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Golan – Mount Hermon and the key strategic points remained under Israeli control. Moreover, the agreement seemed to reduce the issue to a bilateral, territorial one, focusing on the technicalities of demarcation lines. It remained separate from a comprehensive settlement for the whole region, it did not acknowledge the wider grievances

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<sup>422</sup> Briefing Paper, Syria's position on UN Resolution 338 and a peace conference, File: Kissinger's visit to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973, RG 59, Lot#74D416, Box 180

Syria held against Israel and cemented a situation that was far more favourable to Israel, which had always benefited from the bilateralism of the 'separate peace' approach.

These limitations of the agreement were not lost on the Syrians. However, they recognised at the time that it was meant to only be an interim deal before more serious negotiations began. And in fact it did lead to a thawing of relations between Syria and the US, establishing a direct channel of communication that had been lacking up until this point and prompting Kissinger to state that Syrian-American relations had 'greatly improved' as a result.<sup>423</sup> And yet Syria adopted a cautious wait-and-see approach. While Asad sought to explain the advantages of the Agreement to the public,<sup>424</sup> the Americans as peace-brokers were still on probation in Syria's eyes and they did not intend to be too generous with their compliance. And so it was that despite the Disengagement Agreement, grievances began to surface again and relations took a dive by the end of 1974, throwing the prospects for Syrian-Israeli peace into disarray, and in turn undermining the still cold but fledgling relations between Syria and the US.

### **5.2.2 Stalemate and demise of US-Syrian rapprochement**

Syria felt that despite the compromises made on their side, no movement was being made on the Israeli side, while the dynamics of power in the region were shifting ever more in Israel's favour.

Firstly, Saudi Arabia had terminated the OPEC oil embargo which frustrated and angered the Syrians. It was the Syrian view that they had no right to terminate the embargo as the oil was the property of all the Arabs.<sup>425</sup> Syria's opposition to the decision to lift the boycott was understood by the media from the lack of any announcement about it from the Syrian government. For Syria, the lifting of the embargo reflected an abandonment of the Arab nationalist cause, given that the plight of the Syrians and the Palestinians in particular was yet to be resolved.

The extent of Syria's disapproval, and by extension ideological commitment, was reflected by the Algerian oil minister Bel'id Abdusalam who stated: 'Syria will approve the decision

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<sup>423</sup>Telegram, Kissinger to US Embassy, Damascus, 27/5/1974, File: Middle East trip follow-up, RG 59, Briefing Books 1958-1976, Lot#75D146, Middle East Trip Follow Up 5/1974, Box 204.

<sup>424</sup>Memo, Atherton to Washington, 8/7/1974 detailing Asad's 5 July Interview in 'Al-Ahram, File: Pol-15-1, Head of State, Cabinet, Syria 1974. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>425</sup>Telegram, USINT in Damascus to Secretary of State, March 1974, File: FT-11-2, Boycotts Syria 1974. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

when Israel withdraws from all Arab occupied territories including Jerusalem'.<sup>426</sup> The US analysed that Syria's opposition to Saudi Arabia's decision could be explained by three reasons: the need to maintain Syria's credibility with hard-line factions at home and abroad; that it was 'more directed towards Egypt than towards the United States', since 'many within the Syrian regime have since the October War resented unilateral Egyptian decisions affecting Syria without prior consultation'; and finally, that it reflected real opposition within the Damascus regime to the lifting of the boycott 'at a time when Syria has not yet seen any results of the American mediation effort'.<sup>427</sup> It is possible that all the above reasons were accurate; what is clear is that the weakness and collapse of the united Arab front that had emerged during the war caused a deep sense of frustration at the lack of Arab nationalist solidarity and concern at Syria's growing isolation again.

Secondly, Syria felt that the US had not gone far enough as mediators. It was increasingly becoming apparent that Israeli occupation of the Golan and Palestinian territories were not being prioritised in the same way as the Egyptian-Israeli track. Asad stated in an interview with Al-Ahram that the US position 'has not yet reached the extent that is required and called for by a serious endeavour to contribute to the realization of a just peace'.<sup>428</sup> Asad sought to make it clear that while impending Syrian visits to the US would be seeking to further economic bilateral relations between the two states, Syria's priorities remained the freeing of occupied Arab lands and the situation of the Palestinians.<sup>429</sup> Asad also wanted to keep the door of renewed hostilities open, despite the Disengagement Agreement later in May, as a threat against Israeli prevarication at the Geneva conference. The true extent of Syrian dissatisfaction with the Americans was expressed by Zakaria Ismail, the most senior government member involved in US-Syrian communication in this period, who intimated that the Syrians had accepted the October ceasefire and handed over the list of Israeli prisoners 'without having received anything in exchange'.<sup>430</sup> This reflects the growing dissatisfaction felt by the Syrians towards the unfolding peace process and towards the lack of US repayment of their efforts.

By September 1974, these strains were already beginning to show and were to be raised by Khaddam during his visit to Washington. The principal interest in his visit was to query the

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Memo, Atherton to Washington, 8/7/1974 detailing Asad's 5 July Interview in 'Al-Ahram, File: Pol-15-1, Head of State, Cabinet, Syria 1974. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Telegram, USINT in Damascus to Secretary of State, March 1974, File: FT-11-2, Boycotts Syria 1974. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

lack of further progress on Israeli withdrawal and the situation of the Palestinians. His talking points included the following<sup>431</sup>: 1) why Israel had done so little to withdraw from the Golan and Palestinian territories that it occupied in 1967, and did the US raise this with Yitzak Rabin on his recent visit to the US?; 2) Syria was anxious about the Egyptians 'tak[ing] the lead alone' and wished to see greater progress on the Syrian, Jordanian and Palestinian fronts – if not then Syria was prepared to withdraw from negotiations; 3) even with Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank (on the Jordanian front) Syria's acceptance of this would depend on the extent to which Palestinian interests were taken into account; 4) Syria would campaign for a greater role of the PLO and representation of the Palestinians at the Geneva conference; 5) Syria would complain about the infringement of Syrian sovereignty by the presence of UNDOF, insisting they stick to their remit of observation only.

And most significant of the complaints regarded what Syria felt were violations of the Disengagement Agreement committed by Israel. These included: the arrest of three Syrian civilians by Israeli forces in the Syrian village of Haddas, which the Israelis were supposed to evacuate on 19 June; continued Israeli military presence, contrary to the Agreement, in the Abu Zahab, Aakkacha and Abbas hills south of Quneitra; Israeli military operations on Abu Nada Hill overlooking Quneitra; Israeli construction of anti-tank bunkers and laying of mines and barbed wire in the evacuated area; and Israeli obstruction of engineering work to clear the separation zone of mines, thus preventing the return of civilians into the area.

To all these queries and concerns from the Syrians, the US had the following responses: 1) In relation to the stalling over Golan withdrawal, the US felt that: 'a first stage of negotiations on the Jordanian front, as well as a further round of disengagement on the Egyptian front are necessary before we can proceed with a next step on the Syrian front', and that further talks on the latter were 'politically impossible' at that time; 2) with regards to Egypt, the US hoped to persuade Syria the benefit of letting Egyptian-Israeli talks to 'proceed at their own pace', portraying it as a separate issue to wider negotiations; 3) further talks were planned on the Jordanian-Israeli track, but not intended to address the situation of the Palestinians – the extent to which the latter could be taken into account depended on what Israel was willing to live with and allow; 4) a greater role for the PLO could jeopardise Israeli participation, therefore Syria should not push for this; 5) UNDOF was not just an

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<sup>431</sup> State Department Briefing, Alfred Atherton to Secretary of State regarding Bilateral Talks during UNGA: Syria – Foreign Minister Khaddam, 24/9/1974, File: Pol-7, Khaddam's visit to US, Syria 1974. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

observer force, contrary to the Syrians' understanding, but had the right to inspect civilian and military personnel entering the area, even though the area in question had been evacuated by Israel and technically was Syrian territory. This level of inspection of all parties was necessary for Israeli confidence in the Disengagement process.

Finally, to Syria's great annoyance, the Israeli violations they had listed were almost all dismissed by the US as activities which did not 'appear to be violations of the Disengagement Agreement'. The Israeli actions highlighted by the Syrians: were judged to have been established or taken place before the Disengagement Agreement was signed (such as the arrests or Israel's military presence in the hills around Quneitra); could not be validated based on Israeli assurances to the contrary (such as the military operations and obstruction of engineer work); or were technically permitted under the terms of the Agreement because boundary lines were not clear and could be interpreted differently by different parties (which effectively covered all of Israeli's military operations and activities).<sup>432</sup> For Syria, any level of compromise or agreement carried grave risks for the stability of the regime, and yet they persevered with Disengagement with the assurances that both sides were being made to compromise – where they found Israel to be flouting the terms, the US refused to take any action, describing the violations as mere 'irritants'.<sup>433</sup>

The above developments, occurring during a period when Syria was in fact attempting to bridge the divide between itself and the US and demonstrate conciliatory gestures, contributed to an increasing suspicion that none of those gestures were bearing any fruits. Yes, Syria had cooperated with the Disengagement Agreement and established greater ties with the US, but this had been conditional on the fulfilment of certain terms, or at least signs that both mediator and enemy parties were considering them seriously. The continued postponement in addressing those terms were increasingly suspected as empty promises to subdue the Syrians enough to enable the Egyptian and Jordanian settlements to progress without hindrance – these suspicions were close to the truth, as reflected by private comments made by the State Department and Kissinger in his diaries.<sup>434</sup> Thus Syria's rhetoric increasingly became less conciliatory and more threatening, as the short period of

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<sup>432</sup> State Department Briefing, Alfred Atherton to Secretary of State regarding Bilateral Talks during UNGA: Syria – Foreign Minister Khaddam, 24/9/1974, File: Pol-7, Khaddam's visit to US, Syria 1974. DEF-12-5, Lot #76D451, Record Group 59, Entry A1 (5630)

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> SD Briefing paper, Syria, December 1973, File: Visit of Secretary Kissinger to Syrian Arab Republic, 1973.

rapprochement began to unravel in the year of 1974, coinciding with the new presidency of Gerald Ford in the US.

However, this change was not merely in relation to Syria's increasing disillusionment with its own prospects in the negotiation process, but was also strongly related to an exacerbation of hostilities between Israel and Palestinian fedayeen. This was a trend notable from the previous decade, when deterioration in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict had a direct and significant impact on Syria's dispute with Israel, and in turn its relations with the US. Early in March 1974, in response to inflammatory remarks made by Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, Asad told the Syrian press:

The war is not over. It will not be over unless the occupied Arab land is liberated in full and unless the Pal[estinian] people's rights are restored in full...This means that in this country, we must wage a political struggle while maintaining our full military preparedness...

At a time when the Israeli PM insists that the Golan is a part of Israel, we deem it useful to remind... Israeli officials that Palestine is not only a part of the Arab homeland but a basic part of Southern Syria.<sup>435</sup>

Later, Khaddam reiterated Asad's words by stating:

Syria conditions any agreement for disengagement...on the evacuation by Israel of all Arab territory occupied since 1967 and the recognition of the national rights of the Pal[estinian] people...disengagement of forces is only a step. Those who think it is a final solution are badly mistaken.<sup>436</sup>

A couple of months after these exchanges, there was heavy shelling between Israel and Syria, with large numbers of Syrian casualties – at the same time, the US was considering a \$2.2 billion emergency assistance to cover the costs of Israel's military equipment.<sup>437</sup> Furthermore, in May, Israeli-Palestinian tensions also flared into fighting. Palestinian fedayeen were reported by the US to have attacked a teenage campsite in Ma'alot on 15 May 1974, and against 'other innocent civilians' in the area. Kissinger demanded that all governments condemn such actions – Syria did not.<sup>438</sup> Following this incident, Israel carried out air attacks in Lebanon, killing many civilians. The US however, responded not by

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<sup>435</sup> Quotes in Syrian public statements, File: Middle East trip follow-up, RG 59, Briefing Books 1958-1976, Lot#75D146, Middle East Trip Follow Up 5/1974 Box 204

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 146

<sup>438</sup> Telegram, Kissinger to Arab states, 15/5/1974, File: Middle East trip follow-up, RG 59, Briefing Books 1958-1976, Lot#75D146, Middle East Trip Follow Up 5/1974, Box 204.

condemning Israel, but rather to describe the attacks as being part of a ‘cycle of violence’ and entreating all parties to ‘redouble their efforts for a just and lasting peace’. America was accused of showing a much ‘milder’ reaction to Israel’s air attacks than the Ma’alot attacks, to which the US responded: ‘if [the] first action had not occurred, obviously the second would not have taken place.’<sup>439</sup> These developments further served to entrench Syria’s existing scepticism over the US’ role as mediators, as well as reigniting its defence of the Palestinians and pushing it further away from a settlement with Israel.

Thus after these events, Syria’s ideological rhetoric and actions increased. At the Arab League summit in Rabat in October, Syria was the most vocal advocates of the PLO and rallied enough support to get the PLO formally recognised as the representatives of the Palestinians by all the other states present.<sup>440</sup> Furthermore, true to its threats at the start of negotiations, Syria ultimately refused to participate in the Geneva Conference and tried to rally other states around them. Syria’s disillusionment had also been compounded by the increasing divergence of Egypt from the collective Arab cause.

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 159; Yazid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: the Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Clarendon Press, 1997), 321.

### 5.3 Egypt 'Defects'

Thus far we have addressed the American and Syrian positions in relation to the Arab-Israeli negotiations in depth, and how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had a clear impact on the respective policies and relations between Syria and America. Another crucial factor that needs to be addressed at this stage is the role of Egypt. As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, Egypt offers an important comparison that can be used to explain Syria's poor relations with the US. How is it that Egypt could shift from being a champion of Arab nationalism, antagonist of Israel and opponent of American policy in the Middle East, to becoming a key ally of the US and considered as a partner by Israel in any 'peace process'? Investigating this change more closely would in turn help us in understanding why Syria did *not* follow Egypt's example, despite all the predictions by policy-makers and academics alike. The roots of the divergence between Syria and Egypt can be traced further back during Nasser's leadership, but the major developments occurred during the period of negotiations after the 1973 war.

The grounds for suspicion and discord were laid after Sadat agreed to a ceasefire without consulting Asad.<sup>441</sup> This was exacerbated by Egypt's increased compliance with American and Israeli demands, and a tendency to pursue Egyptian interests unilaterally without seemingly considering the ramifications for other parties in the conflict or using its influence to seek solutions for others, in contrast to Syria's policy and rhetoric as exemplified above. I argue that a key explanation for this is Syria's continued adherence to ideological principles, and Egypt's abandonment of them. This had implications for their respective, and eventually very different, relations with the US.

Egypt was aware that it would face problems if it agreed to a full peace treaty with Israel, but saw that these were necessary sacrifices for the sake of stability on the Israeli-Egyptian front. However, such a peace would not only have ramifications for Egypt but for the other parties too. For Egypt was planning to vote against allowing the PLO to represent the Palestinians at the Geneva conference or any subsequent negotiations. It was not only Egypt that was willing to drop the Palestinian cause; Jordan it was reported were 'exceedingly pleased and gratified' about Egypt's decision,<sup>442</sup> fearing greater Palestinian influence and demands in Jordan. But unlike Egypt, Jordan was not yet ready to take the lead in any treaty

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<sup>441</sup> Rabinovich, *Brink of Peace*, 27

<sup>442</sup> Kissinger to Scowcroft, 10/1974, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 33



with Israel and cutting off of the Palestinians.<sup>443</sup> Syria's position can thus be seen in marked contrast to both Egyptian and Jordanian compliance with the US and ambivalence towards the Palestinians.

Indeed Sadat's willingness to comply was acknowledged by the US. Having visited the three Arab leaders, Kissinger reported:

Sadat [is] trying to figure out how he can manage the upcoming October 26 Arab summit so that he is free to undertake Egyptian-Israeli negotiations if he so wishes; a volatile and passionate Asad, [is] firm against piecemeal agreements and seeking to prevent a separate Egyptian-Israeli negotiation; and a worried Hussein [...] will insist he, and not the PLO, be supported at the Summit by his Arab colleagues as the negotiator for the return of the West Bank, but ready to remain aloof from the negotiating process if the Arabs support the PLO.<sup>444</sup>

In stark contrast with Syria, there were no concerns about Sadat's acquiescence with the US; there were few fears by this stage that Sadat would not accept Israel's terms of withdrawal in the Sinai. Rather, the greatest concern was that Sadat would do so far too willingly, thereby greatly weakening his own credibility in the region to such an extent that it would in fact hurt US interests.<sup>445</sup> The Americans were not the only ones with such fears. Such was Sadat's keenness and satisfaction with Israel's terms, he outlined that he was already prepared to go forward with the second stage of disengagement even without consolidation of the first stage. At this stage there was disquiet from Egypt's own ranks. Egypt's Foreign minister Ismail Fahmy made it known that he had serious doubts 'about the feasibility' of what Sadat had agreed to; he was worried not just about trouble from Palestinians, but even a potential coup inside Egypt. So extreme did he view Sadat's acquiescence that he refused to participate in future discussions on greater rapprochement with Israel.<sup>446</sup>

The key question to ask at this point is whether Egypt was selling itself short in future negotiations by being so open to compromise; what bargaining power or leverage did it retain with such open displays of agreement with Israel, and notably few demands of its own? Particularly given the centrality of Egypt's position with the negotiating parties, including the US and Israel, one might note that Egypt had far greater scope to demand greater concessions from Israel for itself and on behalf of its Arab counterparts – an observation that was not lost on Syria. Indeed one outcome of Egypt's flexibility was

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

arguably an increased boldness on the part of Israel –for there were signs that Egypt’s compliance was not being reciprocated by Israel, who set ever higher demands in its favour in negotiations. Kissinger himself noted the imbalance in agreed concessions, stating:

You can get an idea of the magnitude of the Israeli starting demands when I tell you that for withdrawal of somewhere between 30 to 50 kilometers from their present line on the Sinai, they want not only a commitment of Egyptian non-belligerency, but they want assurance there will not be a third phase negotiation for at least five years.<sup>447</sup>

Once again, in contrast to Egypt’s willingness to cooperate and pursue a separate peace, Kissinger on the same trip to the region had five gruelling hours of talks with Asad, who was described throughout this time as being ‘firm’ in his insistence that separate talks should not be pursued, and that he would try to persuade the conference of this view too. Asad made it clear that he did not want Syria to be isolated, but it was ‘his conviction that through a united Arab front there is strength and that the goal must be a total Israeli withdrawal to the ’67 borders, and the rights of the Palestinians restored through the PLO.’<sup>448</sup>

There is much literature arguing that Syria gave up on an ideological agenda to follow Egypt’s example, focusing on self-interest,<sup>449</sup> so it is important to note that in fact Asad did not at any stage in private talks with the US abandon a) his call for peace to be pursued *on all fronts*, and b) his insistence on retaining the right to engage in diplomacy without giving up the right to go to war. This for the Syrians was a crucial bargaining tool, without which the advantage would be handed over to Israel. Therefore by this stage Asad had a ‘deep suspicion of the Egyptians’ as Asad realised that Sadat might be willing to ‘go ahead with the Israelis on his own’.<sup>450</sup> Meanwhile he was also opposed to a Jordanian-Israeli agreement because it excluded the Palestinians.<sup>451</sup> This indicates that Syrian divergence with Egypt’s closer links with Israel and the US was not merely on the basis of Syria’s interests but also due to ideological principles concerning the region.

### **5.3.1 Agreements in Egyptian-Israeli disengagement**

What then were the terms that Egypt agreed to, which laid the foundations for the momentous truce between Egypt and Israel in 1979, and simultaneously entrenched Syria’s

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<sup>447</sup>Kissinger to Scowcroft, 11/1974, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 33

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> See Ajami – ‘the end of pan Arabism’; Adeer Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, (Princeton University Press 2005), 269-274

<sup>450</sup> Kissinger to Scowcroft, October 1974, 11/1974, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 33

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

isolation? Firstly, it is worth noting that Sadat was the first Arab leader to start direct bilateral talks with Israel and to pursue a second stage of disengagement, negotiated in the UN zone in Sinai. Secondly the Disengagement Agreement was not only of military but, crucially, also of political significance.

Before negotiations could begin, Egypt set out the following terms: that any demarcation line should be secure from the other side's troops; that the Disengagement Agreement should not give either side military advantage; that there should be a more equal balance of Egyptian and Israeli troops in the Sinai, which would require more Egyptian forces – particular given the likelihood of hostile reaction to Suez access for Israel; that the buffer zones be wide enough to avoid clashes and give the Egyptian people security, and there should be freedom of movement for Egyptians in Gaza and Sinai.<sup>452</sup>

Despite the concessions, and the limited nature of Egypt's demands, Israel still refused to move forward without further reassurances on the following terms. Notably Israel's demands moved beyond military issues into the political arena. Furthermore, while Egypt's conditions were restricted to bilateral territorial issues, Israel's demands had far wider implications for the region and other Arab parties, and were not only of a bilateral nature. The new Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin led the negotiating team for Israel and stated that:

1. Substantial Israeli withdrawal east of the passes was 'out of the question', and that Israel was not prepared to make any concessions on territory in the Sinai and in the oil fields. This would only be agreed to if Sadat made a public commitment to non-belligerence, even while Arab territory was in effect still occupied.
2. Rabin demanded: a public Egyptian commitment not to make war against Israel
3. Assurances that UN forces would not be removed from the Sinai, plus the establishment of joint committees with supervision teams to oversee the execution of agreement.
4. Despite demands for non-belligerency from Egypt, Israel still wanted an interim agreement, so as to delay the time of full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai.
5. Freedom of navigation on high seas, straits and waterways, plus freedom of flights over them, plus non-restriction on ships, planes or travellers who previously transited in the other party's territory.
6. Open bridges (for tourists, family visits, trading goods).

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<sup>452</sup> 'Eight Israeli points' Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

7. Cessation of anti-Israel diplomatic pressures in other countries and international bodies.<sup>453</sup>

Although the Egyptian military had wanted Egyptian forces east of the passes, with full Israeli withdrawal from that zone, Sadat gave way allowing Israel to remain in the East zone, and for Egypt to only go up to the current Israeli line, west of the passes. Israel also insisted lightly armed Israeli forces should control the main north-south road in the Sinai and that its main forces should be stationed east of the Sinai's Mitla and Giddi passes beyond Egypt's artillery range.<sup>454</sup> While Sadat had consistently refused this in the first Disengagement Agreement, he accepted this in the second stage of the agreement (also known as Sinai II). Moreover he agreed to allow unrestricted passage for Israeli cargo in the Suez Canal, and an end to hostile propaganda and boycotts against both Israel and the US.<sup>455</sup> Unable to agree fully on Israel's demands for only an interim agreement and to make some progress, Sadat instead gave oral assurances that if Syria attacked Israel, Egypt would not join.<sup>456</sup> And while he did not officially concede to a non-belligerency pact, he accepted it in all but name by agreeing to the non-use of force<sup>457</sup> even when the line of Israeli withdrawal had not been confirmed at all. Furthermore, Sadat was not intending to tell his Arab partners of what he was planning at the Arab summit on 24 October 1974.<sup>458</sup> He did not want it known that he was advancing in both political and military talks with Israel. That this was an extraordinary and controversial move by Sadat therefore can be ascertained from the secrecy with which he was operating.

With the final agreement of both sides' terms, the second stage of Disengagement was finally formalised on 4 September 1975 in Geneva. As a result of this, yet a further agreement was signed between the US and Israel because:

The United States recognizes that the Israel interim agreement with Egypt, entailing the withdrawal from highly important strategic and economic assets in Sinai, constitutes an act of great significance on Israel's part in the pursuit of final peace. It elicits full US support.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 337

<sup>455</sup> 'Eight Israeli points' Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Hirst, Beeson, *Sadat*, 193

<sup>458</sup> Kissinger to Scowcroft – another telegram Oct 1974, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 33

<sup>459</sup> 'Eight Israeli points' Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

This came despite the fact that Israel's demands on Egypt had been greater. The great risks that Egypt had taken in its agreements were also not yet acknowledged publicly by the US, and certainly no such agreement between America and Egypt would yet materialise. This would come only after Egypt would sign the full peace treaty, thus further emphasising the fact that Egypt was taking far-reaching action without yet securing greater financial or diplomatic rewards as might have been expected. In contrast, the US was constantly providing Israel with further incentives to garner any compromise at all. America agreed to the following, in effect to reward Israel for its cooperation:

- Ongoing American commitment to Israel's military
- A guarantee of full quantity of oil for Israel's economy –that extra amount being estimated at 450 million dollars annually
- US would enter joint ventures with Israel to construct oil storage facilities
- For a fixed number of years the US government would not expect Israel to withdraw from any new territory in the Sinai
- Additionally Egypt would not seek further withdrawal in that time
- The US secured assurances from Egypt that the Disengagement Agreement was not conditional on 'any act or development in the relations between Israel and other Arab states', that it would not initiate military action against Israel, nor support other states' action
- And the US would ensure that all Egyptian boycotts, and anti-Israel propaganda would cease.<sup>460</sup>

Crucially, two further promises made by the US involved the Syrians. Thus America guaranteed that it would not expect Israel to negotiate an interim agreement with Syria requiring further withdrawal from the Golan Heights; and that it would try to persuade Syria to agree to an extension of UNDOF's mandate in the Golan.<sup>461</sup> What is clear from this is that the US was trading guarantees *against* progress on a Syrian-Israeli settlement in order to persuade Israel to agree to a settlement with Egypt. Syrian demands in the negotiations were thus sacrificed with ease, exposing America's ambivalence towards them.

Although Egypt had already accepted a wide range of terms under the Agreement, they were expected to undertake yet another set of guarantees to placate Israel, and which were all

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<sup>460</sup> Memo of understanding between US and Israel, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

based on US-Israeli demands and had major implications. Egypt did not question the terms but again proved to be acquiescent. These promises included:

1. Not to permit training, planning and organising of Palestinian terrorist activities against Israel
2. To oppose terror activities of all kinds, including kidnappings, hijackings, threats from groups on third country territories – Egypt must give public and official opposition to such acts. It could not grant asylum to perpetrators either.
3. To prohibit the advocating of terrorism, guerrilla action or a ‘popular war’ as a means of conducting warfare against Israel or as an instrument to advance political goals against Israel in official pronouncements or government media.
4. To support Jordan in peace negotiations and would not obstruct talks between Jordan and Israel.<sup>462</sup>

### **5.3.2 Implications of Egypt’s agreements for Syria and Arab relations**

Before such agreements were made, Syria’s prospects of a favourable settlement were already looking bleak. President Ford, having assumed leadership during a stalemate in the Syrian negotiations found himself to be ‘in a complicated way’ because the trajectory of talks had been so disproportionately in favour of Israel that the US now had to maintain the semblance of equal bargaining – thus Ford could not give outright assurances to Israelis that he would not raise and press the Syrian matter, but there was a tacit acceptance that he would not.<sup>463</sup> This reflected the existing deadlock on the Syrian front, as it had become clear that Israel was not willing to concede any further land on the Golan Heights while Syria was demanding full withdrawal. This raised Syria’s scepticism over the utility of talks; the US admitted that Rabin ‘[had] been inconsistent’ during talks. At one stage he had stated that he was ready to look at an interim agreement based only on *cosmetic changes*; but in the autumn he agreed to consider the possibility of a unilateral Israeli steps towards withdrawal, with follow-up discussions with Syria at the Geneva conference.<sup>464</sup>

However, while Syria’s prospects already were bleak, Egypt’s decisions further relegated the importance of Syria in negotiations and put the Golan Heights and the Palestinians’ plight on

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<sup>462</sup> Interim Agreement by Egypt, 3/7/1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>463</sup> Memo of conversation, Sadat, Kissinger, Fahmy and Ambassador Eilts, 9/10/1974, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 33

<sup>464</sup> Briefing before Kissinger’s meeting with Israel’s Rabin, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

the backburner.<sup>465</sup> Firstly, any efforts by the latter two parties were undermined since the second stage of Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement. Egypt's willingness to accept Israel's demands put greater pressure on Syria to move along at the same pace, but also to undermine their own demands as unrealistic and intransigent. The demands were no longer seen as representing a unified Arab position that had to be negotiated but rather one that was now marginal and appeared to be obstructionist to the cause for 'peace'. The Agreement stipulated both parties could not resort to 'the threat or use of force against Israel/ Egypt and to settle all disputes through negotiations and other peaceful means'<sup>466</sup> - a military solution was thus ruled out. With the threat of war with Egypt taken off the agenda, it became less important for Israel to negotiate with the other parties, and gave Israel greater flexibility to exercise and enhance its power in the region.

Secondly, having agreed separately with Egypt to withdraw from the Sinai, Israel claimed that any further withdrawal from other Arab territories would jeopardise Israeli security, and were therefore not prepared to move negotiations forward on other fronts. Israel's leadership argued that now the Knesset did not want Israel to talk to Syria and therefore the leaders had no mandate to do so.<sup>467</sup> Had Egypt not acted unilaterally and had set conditions for Israeli withdrawal from other fronts, it may well have been more difficult for Israel to use its agreement with Egypt to justify its non-cooperation with other parties.

Thirdly, the Disengagement Agreement with Egypt also gave Israel a further pretext to place further demands and conditions on the US. Thus in return for its acceptance of the agreement, Israel extracted guarantees from the US: to supply oil and aid, and that 'should Israel take military action as a result of an Egyptian violation of the Agreement or any of its attachments, the US [Government], if it agrees that such action is reasonable, will lend Israel material and diplomatic support'.<sup>468</sup> Furthermore, if *any* world power threatened Israel, its security or sovereignty, the US promised to lend support, and it agreed to ensure that the Israel-Egypt agreement *was not contingent on any other agreement with other Arab states*.

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<sup>465</sup> Speaking of the Camp David Accords in 1979, Lesch states: 'Achieving full and just rights of the Palestinians became infinitely more difficult the moment Anwar Sadat signed along the dotted line – the Arab world had just lost most of its leverage'. *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 264. The agreement allowed Israel to act with greater impunity in the region. Arguably this process was set in motion at Sinai II, as suggested by Quandt in *Peace Process*.

<sup>466</sup> Memorandum of understanding: agreement between the governments of Israel and the United States, draft, 19/8/1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 34

<sup>467</sup> Israeli Embassy to Washington, 9/9/1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>468</sup> Memorandum of understanding: agreement between the governments of Israel and the United States, draft, 19/8/1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 34

Significantly for Syria, Israel set the condition that the US would not press Rabin to change his position on an Israeli-Syrian agreement.

### **5.3.3 Egyptian-Syrian relations deteriorate and pressure on Syria**

By September 1975, relations deteriorated significantly between Syria and Egypt as a result of the widespread view that Egypt had betrayed its Arab partners and had conceded too much to Israel and the US: In September the Egyptian Embassy in Damascus was attacked. The Egyptian foreign minister Fahmy responded that if such an attack happened again, he would order the destruction of the Syrian Embassy in Cairo.<sup>469</sup> The attack was perpetrated by 100-150 members of Rifaat Asad's special forces dressed in civilian clothes – Syrian authorities did warn the Egyptians that a demonstration was planned, and later claimed the rogue rioters had got into embassy through the back. So Egyptians issued an ultimatum to Syria that the Egyptian Ambassador would be withdrawn if the anti-Egypt tactics were not stopped.<sup>470</sup>

Egypt's precarious position was made worse because Israel continued to praise Sadat and compare him with other Arabs' belligerency. This in fact weakened Sadat and led to him being described by many as a traitor. Sadat was put in an unwinnable situation – the US reported that he did not want to admit to his agreements with Israel in public, but at the same time in 'protesting his innocence' against the accusations of collusion with Israel, he would be accused by Israel of reneging against his agreement not to engage in anti-Israel propaganda.<sup>471</sup> It was said that Egypt expected sharp criticism from the Palestinians, but that the 'unexpected virulence of Syrian reaction is upsetting. As is [...the] concomitant deafening silence of even friendly Arab states'.<sup>472</sup> According to reports, Sadat was calling his foreign minister Fahmy everyday to ask him 'what can be done to reassure and calm the Syrians down'.<sup>473</sup>

Despite his dismay at these attacks, the charges that Sadat seemingly had few answers to were the ones coming from both Syria and Israel (described by the US as 'strange bedfellows' on this occasion) that the Egyptian front was now frozen thus ending the state of war 'practically and contractually'. Syria was also furious that Sadat failed to mention other Arab territories or mention Palestinian people in his agreement; that he had introduced

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<sup>469</sup> Telegram, Egyptian Embassy to Kissinger, 9/9/1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Cairo to Washington, September 1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid.



‘armed US intelligence agents’ into Arab territory, and had rewarded ‘Israeli extortion with colossal amounts of US aid’. Sadat admitted to the US that he and his advisors had anticipated these criticisms, but had hoped ‘Damascus at least would not, repeat not air them publicly’.<sup>474</sup>

Despite praising Sadat’s courage publicly, the US recognised in private that Sadat did not get what he had initially wanted from negotiations, and had conceded more than he and his advisors thought was politically safe. Such was the level of antipathy towards Sadat, and the unpopularity directed towards Egypt, that the following was noted: ‘That the GOE [Government of Egypt] would shed no tears at Sadat’s disappearance is assumed here...’<sup>475</sup>

### **5.3.4 Egypt’s motivations**

Why then did Egypt act so readily? While Egypt’s decisions and actions have been outlined, the reasons behind them now need greater analysis. This in turn will help to explain why Syria did not pursue the same path. Egypt’s decision was viewed even by its supporters as extraordinary – in trying to assess the reasons, the US provided a number of explanations.

(i) Firstly, Sadat had taken a gamble in shifting his reliance from the Soviet Union to the US, and his cooperation with Israel was intensely unpopular. He was very conscious of his critics – he was stung by the criticisms levelled at his decisions and saw this as his last real chance to prove his strategy was working, and had not ‘hopelessly stalled’ as his critics were charging.<sup>476</sup> For 18 months Sadat was unable to get movement on the Israeli front and was beginning to lose support even among those who initially supported an agreement. Thus any opportunity at a settlement was deemed better than none – it was a case of ‘now or never’ for Sadat.<sup>477</sup> It should be noted that Asad too was under pressure to prove that cooperation with the US would lead to results; but unlike Sadat who got deeper into concessions in order to save face, Asad walked away from negotiations.

(ii) Sadat, however, felt he could not follow Asad’s example. The US argued that he knew Egypt could not ‘win’ a war, undermining the value of keeping the option of war open as Syria preferred. Egypt could still have gained from a limited war, which might have enabled it to take back the Mitla and Giddi passes. But Sadat also knew that with such an act Egypt

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

<sup>476</sup> Cairo to Washington, Sept 1975, Cairo to Washington, September 1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

would lose US support. He could not risk this, especially having alienated the Soviet Union who refused to participate in the Geneva ceremony to sign the agreements; loss of Soviet support was already placing economic pressures on Egypt and the US needed to be kept on side to compensate for this.<sup>478</sup> Having failed to secure the passes or oilfields from Israel, American support was one of the few gains Sadat could use to justify his controversial policy and argue it was working – if this too was jeopardised it would be a ‘crushing admission that his policy was bankrupt’.<sup>479</sup>

(iii) The US also argued that Sadat was duped by the mystique of the Free Officers in 1952, believing that the Arab world’s ‘respect for his person and that of his old comrades is immutable’.<sup>480</sup> Sadat’s sceptical foreign minister Fahmy went as far as to claim that ‘this is [the] sole important reason that Sadat nerved himself to sign [a] ‘bad’ agreement...now these premises have proven dramatically untrue, [the] president is in some state of agitation’.<sup>481</sup>

(iv) Furthermore, the US argued that Sadat was impressed with the notion that a disengagement involving the first case of Israeli withdrawal from Arab territory would be brought about by negotiations and not war – Sadat wanted to construct this as a symbolic victory for his and Egypt’s legacy, in which Egypt helped to initiate the beginning of a peace process after decades of conflict.<sup>482</sup>

(v) Despite widespread unpopularity, there were some who did support Sadat’s decisions – this provided him with enough encouragement to pursue an agreement with Israel and to agree to so many concessions. Among these were the Saudi regime, whom the US argued were pivotal in persuading Sadat; the US argued many Egyptians were also ‘in [the] mood to accept even [a] ‘bad’ Disengagement Agreement’, despite the apparent abandonment of ideology that it represented – they argued businessmen wanted stability, while the army were aware of the ‘severe disadvantages’ it faced if it continued on a war-footing. War fatigue and a yearning for economic improvement were cited as key motivations for Egypt’s rapprochement.<sup>483</sup> There were of course many other sections of Egypt’s population that were excluded from America’s analysis here, as was borne out so dramatically on 6 October 1981 when Sadat was assassinated.

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<sup>478</sup> Cairo to Washington, Sept 1975, Cairo to Washington, September 1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.; see also Yoram Meital, *Egypt’s Struggle for Peace*, (University Press of Florida, 1997), 132

(vi) Finally, more pressing realities also impacted Sadat's decision – he was aware that Egypt was militarily weak and vulnerable at this time. He had hoped that through this agreement he had sealed his borders against Israeli attacks. He also saw it as opening up the chance of obtaining supplies from western sources, which had previously been withheld.<sup>484</sup>

Thus the following reasons – Egypt's economic and military stagnation; support from business elites and conservative Arab neighbours; the prestige of initiating peace; the need to stave off criticism and produce something after two years of talks and a costly war; and fear of losing newfound US support, explain why Sadat agreed to sign the agreement, with incomplete Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai and a range of far-reaching concessions in the military and political realm. For all their plaudits, even the US described his actions as a 'faute de mieux'.<sup>485</sup>

While much of the literature highlights, even lauds Sadat for his pragmatism in turning his back on ideological principles, indicating that it was a mark of a mature state,<sup>486</sup> the documents reveal the high level of concern held not only by insiders in the Egyptian government but also the US who feared that Sadat had gone too far and acted too hastily in discarding popular opinion and altering Egypt's foreign policy so dramatically. Of course Sadat knew the risks were high, but he seemed unprepared for the level of opposition he was to face.

To understand this opposition it should be noted that he had left himself open to attack on almost every traditional principle of Arab nationalist philosophy: having expelled the Soviets, he had invited the Americans to play an even greater role in the region, thus seeming to facilitate the reintroduction to the area of superpower 'imperialists'; he had agreed to the de facto suspension of the state of belligerency against Israel, which had been the main ideological driving force after decolonisation – in doing so Sadat was seen to be violating the basic tenet of Arab solidarity, in effect accepting the status quo in the region when he had been unable to get a public and firm determination from the US to seek Israel's

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<sup>484</sup> Cairo to Washington, Sept 1975, Cairo to Washington, September 1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 646.

<sup>485</sup> Cairo to Washington, Sept 1975, Cairo to Washington, September 1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>486</sup> Not least shown in the statements made by Sadat himself in which he announced that he was taking a pragmatic, realistic and unemotional approach – see Yoram Meital, *Egypt's Struggle for Peace*, 132-133; see also, describing Sadat's policy as a 'more realistic approach', Raphael Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, (1985), 172

immediate pullback from the Golan, and had ‘nothing to offer the Palestinians’ except a statement that he had urged dialogue with them.<sup>487</sup> The following assessment from the US State Department sums up Egypt’s predicament accurately: ‘In short, Sadat will be hard-pressed to refute charges that his is a self-seeking ‘Egypt first’ policy which flies in the face of Arab nationalist principles of 1952 revolution’.<sup>488</sup>

The shift, or as some called it ‘defection’ by Egypt was completed over the following years, culminating in a formal peace treaty with Israel on 26 March 1979. The symbolic impact of the turnaround had been made all the greater with Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in 1977, followed by a series of foreign aid agreements with the US, producing a solid alliance which would last for decades. As a result, Egypt benefited from \$2billion of US aid every year and was given a central role in the ‘peace process’ and other regional affairs. While it is cited as an example of Egypt giving up ideology for pragmatic self-interest, there are important ways in which this assessment comes into question.

Firstly, it strongly went against popular opinion to such an extent that it placed the regime at risk. Sadat himself paid the ultimate price when he was assassinated by gunmen on 6 October 1981. Both the controversial pro-American policy and the regime remained intact after Hosni Mubarak came to power, but at the expense of its reputation and popular leadership that Egypt had enjoyed prior to the truce with Israel.<sup>489</sup> Nor did the country as a whole benefit as much as was hoped in terms of development and economic advancement: US aid barely trickled down to lower levels of society, as poverty levels increased over the decades. And finally, the region’s problems were not resolved by Egypt’s actions – they did not produce the domino-effect as was expected, Israel still faced hostility and insecurity and indeed it could be argued that the marginalisation of Israel’s opponents and Egypt’s apparent kow-towing to US policy increased radicalism in the region. Egypt’s ‘self-interest’ contributed to the region’s problems rather than resolve them.

If pragmatism is associated with efficiency and strategic prowess, then the outcomes of Sadat’s policy fell short. Moreover, Sadat’s policy was seen even by contemporaries as idealistic, rather than pragmatic. His expectations in America’s ability to deliver

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<sup>487</sup> Cairo to Washington, , Sept 1975, Cairo to Washington, September 1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 36

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> Author's interview with Imad Moustapha, Syrian Ambassador to the US, Washington DC, June 2009, in which he stated that Syria would not be prepared to pay a political price and sacrifice the Palestinians as Egypt did; he stated Syria's stance against Israel made it the most popular state among Arab public opinion, ahead of Mubarak's Egypt (i.e. that it had gone against public opinion).

concessions from Israel if the Arabs complied, and his granting of concessions before these were reciprocated by Israel,<sup>490</sup> exposed naivety in negotiation skills or even recklessness. And finally, as analysed above, Sadat's policy was not entirely the result of rational decision-making, but rather there was a degree of hubris and desperation in his motives. From the anger shown by his ministers and Sadat's failure to consider the extent of public opposition that might be stoked by his policies, it is evident that there was little collective decision-making and poor intelligence of popular opinion at the heart of the regime.

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<sup>490</sup> Indeed according to Lesch, Sadat 'was the one who made most of the concessions', *1979 The Year that shaped the Modern Middle East*, .44

## 5.4 Conclusion

In two decades time, the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir claimed that a private letter given by President Ford to Rabin during the Disengagement talks stipulated that the US would *not* challenge Israel about its continued occupation of the Golan Heights.<sup>491</sup> Shamir argued that this letter laid the parameters for future talks and justified Israel's non-cooperation over the Golan Heights. Such a letter would indeed be highly controversial, given that it directly contradicted America's public rhetoric, not least to the Syrians, that it was acting as a neutral mediator and was working on the basis of UN resolutions stipulating withdrawal. However, the following archival evidence shows that Shamir's claims were accurate, as Kissinger had recorded the content of a letter from Ford to Rabin which matches the wording of the note given by Shamir to Secretary Baker in 1991:

The US will support the position that an overall settlement with Syria in the framework of a peace agreement must include effective arrangements to assure Israeli security from attack from the Golan Heights. The US appreciates fully and gives great weight to Israel's view that any peace agreement with Syria must be predicated on Israeli remaining on the Golan Heights. The US is prepared to support this position if other arrangements which might prove feasible are not, in the US judgement, of comparable effectiveness in protecting Israel's survival and security, to which the US is fully committed.<sup>492</sup>

Syria, of course, was ignorant of any such promises made by the US to Israel. As long as this secret arrangement between Israel and the US continued, the premise of any current or future negotiations between Syria and Israel was flawed; meanwhile this demonstrates that the US was not acting in an even-handed way with the Syrians and in fact helped to predetermine a negative outcome in Syrian-Israel negotiations and thereby US-Syrian relations.

And Indeed the US had already laid the foundations for this one-sided policy prior to this communication. The State Department had been more receptive of Syria's concessions and more genuine in wanting to reach a comprehensive settlement including Syria. But whatever they had expected from the talks, they were somewhat irrelevant to the negotiation process. It largely came to be dictated on the American side through the President's office and

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<sup>491</sup> James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992* (Putnam's Sons, 1995), 424

<sup>492</sup> Letter from Ford to Rabin, Kissinger to General Allon, 23/7/1975, Records of Sisco, RG 59, entry 5405, Box 34

especially by Kissinger – the sidelining of the State Department allowed Kissinger to wield a great deal of influence.

Independent of the fact that the American public were in favour of Israel with a danger of an anti-Arab backlash if the administration were seen to do too much for Arabs,<sup>493</sup> Kissinger's own memoirs show that he had no intention to push for the fulfilment of resolution 242, which stipulated Israel withdraw from all Arab land occupied in 1967.<sup>494</sup> Kissinger always consulted with Israel before talking to the Arabs, thereby ensuring that Israel demands were the starting point of any negotiations; moreover, there were times when Kissinger actively discouraged Israel from moving too quickly in negotiations in case it made Israel 'look weak' – the US played a role therefore in supporting Israel's inflexibility.<sup>495</sup> Kissinger also acknowledged that he wanted to make Arabs learn the lesson of the 'impossibility' of achieving anything through military means.<sup>496</sup> The Arabs' hand had been weakened therefore well before negotiations even started.

To answer the questions this chapter began with, the Americans had already prepared the ground for their preferred outcome, which was a piecemeal settlement that excluded the Syrians and the Palestinians –the US proved not to be a neutral mediator but rather it actively avoided pursuing Syrian and Palestinian demands for fear of upsetting Israel and jeopardising the Egyptian and Jordanian negotiations. Thus its relationship with Israel – not just at the diplomatic level but also faced with pro-Israeli public opinion domestically – did hinder a more just and comprehensive settlement that reflected the goals of all the parties. Moreover, there was evidence to show that the US held deep-seated perceptions and assumptions about the Syrians that meant that their track in negotiations was given low priority to begin with. Such was their conviction that Syria's radicalism and intransigence would not result in a settlement, that they merely saw the Syrians in an instrumental light to make the path smoother for the other parties – hardly conducive to a successful outcome on the Syrian-Israel front.

To what extent, then, were American perceptions of Syria accurate? Syria's position was supported by UN resolutions 242 and 338; in legal terms their demands were neither unrealistic nor unjustified. In this light it would be difficult to argue that Syria was being

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<sup>493</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 134

<sup>494</sup> Kissinger, *Upheaval*, 197; 543; 555

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.* 139

<sup>496</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 219; Kissinger, *Upheaval*, 502

obstructionist because it maintained its basic demand for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territory – the logic of which would mean Syria would have to concede territory to Israel, occupied in contravention of the Geneva Convention, in order to be rid of the obstructionist label. Thus to describe Syria's actions as obstructionist are not warranted.

In terms of the view that Syria was intransigent and inflexible there is some accuracy to suggest that Syria was the most consistent in its demands and the least willing to sacrifice its starting terms in negotiations. But again it would be difficult to see what principles could have been sacrificed when their demands for withdrawal, though crucial, were also very basic. Moreover, it was not the case that Syria was entirely inflexible and unwilling to negotiate any terms or agree to interim arrangement that favoured Israel more – their acceptance of the Disengagement Agreement and willingness to allow temporary territorial concessions demonstrated that they were a party that one could bargain with. In fact Israel were just as unwilling to concede its war-time advantages than the Arab parties, if not more, while the inducements needed to persuade them to even engage in talks were always far greater than any offered to the Arabs. There were a number of principles that Israel was not willing to concede – some of these were for deep-seated ideological reasons and some were due to public pressure. In that sense Israel shares more similarities with Syria than Egypt, with whom Syria is usually compared, because Syria similarly would not sacrifice key ideological principles – demands for a comprehensive settlement, opposition to Israel and a united Arab front – even in the face of financial, military and political incentives. The regime's adherence to Arab nationalism was both personal and historical; but it was all the more pressing and indispensable because of popular opinion.

Sadat's role was important, but he did not shape the nascent peace process as boldly as he hoped. He ended up facilitating the outcome desired by the Americans (so willingly at times that even they were surprised) but his actions also weakened the Arabs' strength to negotiate and to retain leverage. Crucially his actions gave the separate peace initiative the legitimacy needed of having Arab support. The status quo of Israeli occupation of other Arab lands was therefore solidified with the removal of a key challenger. Sadat could pursue this path by abandoning ideology, which he saw as intangible and unrealistic, and opting for the self-help route. And yet his decisions were not only motivated by self-interest for Egypt but they were also influenced by a combination of idealism, desperation, need for recognition and hubris (particularly in underestimating the level of opposition his policies would evoke). Given the non-rational motives at play, the pragmatism that is often associated with Sadat's



policy is therefore questionable. Syria, on the other hand, though retaining its ideological principles, also demonstrated caution and realism with regards to the outcomes of the negotiations, and a greater awareness of a) the public mood, b) its own limitations both domestically and internationally and c) the strategies and goals of its opponents. Thus conversely, Syria's policy was ideological in substance, and pragmatic in its calculations and implementation. It was thus both these approaches which prevented Syria from following Egypt in signing a truce with Israel and forming an alliance with the US.

## Chapter 6

### US-Syrian Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Era

At the close of the 1970s after the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Syria found itself isolated in the region. But the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the emergence of the Islamic Republic in Tehran provided Syria with an unexpected and unlikely ally. Syria was the first state in the Middle East to recognise the new Islamist regime, and was the only state to support Iran during the Iranian hostage crisis. Thus a long-term strategic alliance was forged between the two anti-imperialist states. This served to further entrench US-Syrian hostility throughout the 1980s, with the US placing Syria on its list of state sponsors of terrorism, and applying greater sanctions on the regime. In this context, the Gulf crisis in 1990 when the US sought Syria's help, marked a dramatic turnaround in the fortunes of US-Syrian relations.

The ensuing decade has at times been described as the decade of hope because of the unlikely improvements in relations between previously hostile states.<sup>497</sup> The disruption of the structural consistencies of previous decades places increased scrutiny on the role of ideology in Syria's foreign policy, and how it adapted to the altered international setting of the 1990s. This chapter seeks to examine Syria's adherence to ideology in the face of changing regional and global circumstances, and how this in turn affected its relations with the US.

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<sup>497</sup> David Lesch, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 317; Itamar Rabinovich, *Waging Peace – Israel and the Arabs 1948-2003*, (Princeton University Press, 2004), 38

## 6.1 Syria's Participation in the Gulf War and Implications for Ideology

On 2 August 1990, Iraq invaded and occupied neighbouring Kuwait. The UN Security Council passed resolution 660 which condemned the invasion and demanded complete and unconditional withdrawal, secured by the use of force if necessary. This was followed soon by cutting off arms supplies and the deployment of US troops in Saudi Arabia.

The usual pro-western Arab states were expected to support America's charge against Saddam Hussein. But what made the Gulf War unique in comparison to previous conflicts in the region was Syria's participation on the side of the US against Iraq. Lesch even states that Syria 'was most important of all the Arab states in the coalition'.<sup>498</sup> The US hoped that this unusual partnering gave the intervention more credibility, supporting American claims that most of the Arab world was opposed to Saddam Hussein's invasion and deflecting some of the criticism that this was a colonial venture.<sup>499</sup> By all accounts Syria stuck to the terms of the embargo and economic sanctions on Iraq.<sup>500</sup> And indeed when the war began, Syrian troops took part in backing Egyptian forces in Kuwait, although they would not go in to fight Iraqi forces.<sup>501</sup>

While it helped to reduce Syria's isolation in the region, it had for a while negative consequences for Syria's reputation of standing up to the Americans and external meddling in the region's affairs. It raised doubts at the time about Syria's commitment to Arab nationalist ideology, and academics and policy-makers alike for years afterwards cited this event as marking the death-knell for Arab nationalism in the region. Such perceptions and accusations of hypocrisy did trouble Asad. For years he had prided himself on not caving in to pressure from the US or its neighbours to give up the ideological 'struggle'. Thus, in contrast to the eagerness of other Arab states,<sup>502</sup> he was reported to have been reluctant about participating in combat operations, eventually claiming that he was committing troops in defence of Saudi Arabia, 'not for an assault on brother Arabs'.<sup>503</sup> To the US Secretary of State James Baker, who questioned why he was in a dilemma, Asad explained:

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<sup>498</sup> Lesch, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 320

<sup>499</sup> Djerejian, Baker's trip to Persian gulf, Helsinki summit, Moscow ministerial, Europe: RG 59, press materials for the Secretary's trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

<sup>500</sup> James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 301

<sup>501</sup> Ibid, 374

<sup>502</sup> Notably Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

<sup>503</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 376

What do we say to the Syrian people?...There are Syrians who questions why we have sent forces to the Gulf...you talked about American public opinion. We have similar problems.<sup>504</sup>

Evidently Asad understood the risk he was taking in supporting the American venture. Syria's image in the eyes of other Arabs, public opinion, and not being seen to betray the ideological consistency which Syria had always publicly given great importance to, were all essential to Syria's self-identity and political credibility. Other states built their status and influence on resources or military power, Syria had built its status on the power of ideas.

Did Syria's decision to participate in the American-led coalition therefore represent a crisis in identity for state and people, and a dilution in its Arab nationalist, anti-hegemonic ideology? Had Syria relented to the changing dynamics of a now unipolar world, in which bandwagoning with the US was seen as the only viable option? These are the questions that are regularly posed in relation to Syria's participation in the Gulf War, with implications for the role of ideology in both Syria's foreign policy and its relations with the US.

There are two main charges of hypocrisy levelled at Syria and its ideological claims as a result of the Gulf War. The first is that Syria sacrificed the principle of Arab unity in supporting the coalition against its Arab neighbour Iraq.<sup>505</sup> The long-term political and personal rivalry between Saddam Hussein and Asad is well documented,<sup>506</sup> all the more ironic given that the two states were both Ba'thist. It is often argued that Asad was eager to see action taken against Iraq because his grudge against Saddam Hussein superseded ideology.

The second charge is that Syria sacrificed the principle of protecting Arab autonomy and resistance to external intervention in the region's affairs by supporting America's lead against Saddam Hussein. As elucidated in the previous chapters Syria had for years held to the principle of challenging American dominance due to the protection that it gave to Israel. Syria contrasted itself with neighbours Egypt to demonstrate that it was principled and would not be pressured to 'sell-out' to the US. Thus it is also argued that Asad was now willing to bandwagon with the US given the decline of the Soviet Union, exposing its ideological claims as mere rhetoric.

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Humphreys, *The Strange Career of pan-Arabism*, 64

<sup>506</sup> See Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th v. Ba'th*.

### 6.1.1 Why did Syria join the military action against Iraq?

Let us address both these arguments - it is true that Syria did have its own grievances against Iraq and there is no doubt that there was a personal component to their running dispute. However, this is too simplistic an account and reflects an un-nuanced realist interpretation of the region's politics; for there were other factors overriding this personal element that were important drivers behind Syria's decision in 1990. Syria's main motivation was summed up by Baker:

'...he left no doubt that he had no brief for his bitter enemy. He indicated that Saddam's invasion was wrong, and therefore Syria was adopting the principled position of supporting the coalition's efforts.'<sup>507</sup> ...Asad said: 'We will do the right thing...but it is not easy to do because of our public opinion'.<sup>508</sup>

Indeed this case has been put forward by Syrian officials since the event. Ghayth Armanazi, the Syrian head of the Arab league at the time of the Gulf War explained:

Before viewing this period as one of cooperation with the US against a fellow Arab country, it is important to understand that Syria saw Saddam's attack against Kuwait as damaging the crucial notion of a united Arab front. Saddam's actions were giving the rest of the world the idea that the Arab world had deep divisions and were willing to threaten and attack each other. This was deemed by Syria as a greater threat to pan-Arab ideology, than seeking the help of an external power.<sup>509</sup>

While such a position lacks the greater complexity that was likely to be involved in Asad's motives, it does in many ways support the analysis put forward in this thesis regarding the praxis of Syrian ideology. It reflects, in part, the primarily *political* nature of Arab nationalism, and the notion that Arab sovereignty, which rested on the need for order within the regional system, was paramount.<sup>510</sup> One of the greatest threats to these principles came after the First World War when the region was in disorder, and Arabs collaborated with European powers to annex territory and create their own monarchies. During the Gulf War however (and according to the official Syrian line) the Arab states were not cooperating with the US to take Iraq's territory for themselves, but to protect another Arab state, Kuwait, from being overpowered. If Iraq's actions were left unchallenged, this would create disorder in the region and would be used an excuse for external powers to enter the region again under

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<sup>507</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 297-9

<sup>508</sup> Ibid. 279

<sup>509</sup> Author's interview with Ghayth Armanazi, London, 5 June 2007; also corroborated by Ambassador Imad Moustapha (interview with Author, Washington DC, June 2009), who argued that 'Saddam's aggression was in a way justifying the legitimacy of other forms of occupation – and also it gave a pretext to the US to come to the region. When we agreed with the US we got guarantees that the US would not occupy Iraq...it gave us leverage to stop the US end[ing] one evil to create another evil by occupying Iraq.'

<sup>510</sup> See Chapter 2

the pretext of restoring order. A contained intervention, one which united the Arabs in a common cause, was deemed as a legitimate reason for acting against another Arab state.<sup>511</sup>

After the war, Asad was challenged by the Jordanians at the Arab summit, who queried how Syria could justify working with the Americans, and who called for a solely Arab solution to the crisis. Asad responded by asking how many of the Arab states present would have been willing or ready to commit forces to liberate Kuwait, and how many would have taken serious steps to help?<sup>512</sup> Thus his position was that in that instance, accepting American help was the only option to prevent even worse developments that would disunite and weaken the whole region, making it more susceptible to external intervention in the future.<sup>513</sup> Asad's explanation attempted to justify Syria's decision as being wholly consistent with its ideological principles.

But if we analyse the decision in a more critical light, then it cannot be separated from the post Cold War context. While Syria did not want to admit to yielding to the US, the uncertain and unprecedented situation presented by US unipolarity placed a great deal of pressure on the Syrians to bandwagon in this instance, in a way that marked a great discontinuity from past policies. Furthermore, Asad's wish to rein back Iraq was less out of solidarity for Kuwait and more out of fear of Iraqi aggrandisement against its other neighbours, including Syria. Thus very defensive, realist concerns against the US and Iraq were also at play here.

A second more principled factor behind Asad's decision was concern for the credibility of the UN. American intervention on this occasion was seen to be different from previous instances of US involvement in the region because it had the approval of the United Nations. There had been in total 12 UN Security Council resolutions and not responding to them would have affected the credibility of the UN.<sup>514</sup> The UN had authorised the use of force if Iraq did not withdraw from Kuwait through a final resolution 678 on November 29 1990. After the conflict, just prior to the Madrid talks, Asad reinforced his support for the UN by stating that the UN gave collective action 'international legitimacy' and 'moral authority'.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Djerejian, Baker's trip to Persian gulf, Helsinki summit, Moscow ministerial, Europe: RG 59, press materials for the Secretary's trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

<sup>512</sup> Author's interview with Ghayth Armanazi, London, 5 June 2007

<sup>513</sup> Djerejian, Baker's trip to Persian gulf, Helsinki summit, Moscow ministerial, Europe: RG 59, press materials for the Secretary's trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

<sup>514</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 321

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.* 447

This has been a consistent factor in Syria's foreign policy since the 1967 war.<sup>516</sup> The importance Syria gives to the role of the UN is tied to the concept of multilateralism deflecting the hegemony of the great powers; but also, Syria saw the UN as an important tool of moral and political recourse against Israel, and was aware that in turn Israel perceived the UN as a 'mortal enemy'.<sup>517</sup> Syria had always supported the implementation of UN resolutions in the Arabs' plight, thus supporting UN resolutions now would also increase the legitimacy of the resolutions pertaining to Israel. Similarly, to undermine the UN in the Gulf crisis would have served to undermine those UN resolutions against Israel. Thus the moral and legal legitimacy of Syria's grievance against Israel and demands for the Arabs has become symbiotic with defending the UN.<sup>518</sup>

Finally, to challenge the notion that Syria was strongly motivated by its longstanding rivalry with Iraq, we should compare Syria's reaction to US policy towards Iraq over the subsequent years. Having supported the US in the Gulf crisis, Syria strongly opposed US air strikes on Iraq in 1998, with numerous public demonstrations against the US; this followed efforts by both regimes to renew diplomatic contacts late in 1997 when Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz was received in Syria. Syria also took part in the oil for food programme exporting medicine and food to Iraq during American sanctions on the Iraqi regime; and Syria also reopened the oil pipelines that had been closed since 1982, and three border posts. It was reported that Syria lobbied Saudi Arabia in this time to reintegrate Iraq back into the Arab 'fold'.<sup>519</sup>

And more recently, in 2003, despite the traditional rivalry between the two states, Syria was the most vocal in its opposition to the US invasion, and in doing so it placed the Syrian regime at risk from a military attack<sup>520</sup> and put it at odds with its long-term ally Iran. So while the personal and political animosity between Syria and Iraq was deep, its impact on Syria's policy, and the notion that it forced Syria to align with the US just to spite an old rival to the detriment of its ideological principles, has been exaggerated.

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<sup>516</sup> Author's interview with the Syrian Ambassador to the UN, Dr. Bashar Ja'afari, UN Headquarters New York, February 2009

<sup>517</sup> Baker, 448

<sup>518</sup> Author's interview with Dr. Bashar Ja'afari, UN Headquarters New York, February 2009

<sup>519</sup> Lucy Dean (Ed.), *The Middle East and North Africa 2004* (Europa Publications, 50<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2003), 484

<sup>520</sup> Author's interview with Flynt Leverett, Former advisor to the American NSC, Washington DC, June 2009

### 6.1.2 Why did Syria collude with the US?

While it has been argued above that Syria bandwagoned with the US during its ‘unipolar’ moment, despite being ideologically opposed to much of American policy in the region, this too needs a more nuanced explanation. Firstly, in 1990, the coalition against Iraq was built on factors that were very different from those that formed the ‘coalition of the willing’ in 2003. Notably the US acted more gradually and did not act unilaterally. It built up diplomatic and particularly economic pressure via the UN, before moving on to military pressure.<sup>521</sup>

Moreover the US did not want the coalition to be attached to connotations of the west lecturing an Arab state, and was keen to emphasise that this time the Soviet Union (in its last days), and other Arab states, were fully on board and endorsed the plan.<sup>522</sup> Syria perceived that the US was trying to build a genuine consensus with other parties in the region, the UN and even America’s normal enemies (including Cuba), rather than seeking the bare minimum needed to facilitate an American hegemonic exercise.<sup>523</sup> Indeed as outlined above, America’s policy served to strengthen the UN on this occasion, not the opposite as had been the case in the past. Going through the UN was crucial in getting the Arab states to join, in contrast to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s suggestion for unilateral action to protect US interests.<sup>524</sup> What this demonstrates is that Syria was not averse to cooperating with the US at all costs. Its opposition to the US over the years had been built on US policies which were at odds with Syrian ideology and interests. Where the US was seen to be attempting a change in its approach, there was room for change in Syria’s policies as well.

Finally, and crucially, Syria saw a rare opportunity in which the US needed its support and participation, and wanted to use that as leverage to make its own demands. It questioned the US why it had come to Kuwait’s aid when it had been occupied, but failed to do the same for the Palestinians against Israel. Gradually, there was growing momentum behind the notion that this occasion of Arab unity under a common cause, and Arab cooperation with the US, should be grasped as an opportunity to break the stale-mate in the Arab-Israeli conflict after the Gulf War had ended. Despite its suspicions of the US, Syria recognised that America

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<sup>521</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 277

<sup>522</sup> Background briefing by administration official, Ankara, 9/8/1990, file: trip of Secretary Baker to Ankara, RG 59, press materials for the Secretary’s trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

<sup>523</sup> James Baker, 9/8/1990, press conference, file: trip of Secretary Baker to Ankara, RG 59, press materials for the Secretary’s trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

<sup>524</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 279



was ‘a useful power broker’ and wanted to channel that influence to help the Arab cause.<sup>525</sup>

At a joint press conference, Syria’s Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa stated:

We hope that these relations will improve to preserve the interest of the two countries and peace and stability in the region...we believe that an Iraqi unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait in implementation of UN security council resolution, would certainly pave the way after that for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories ...If we take into consideration the post cold war [situation] then it is important and imperative that this region should witness genuine peace and stability. The immediate issue now is to get the Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait and then certainly if you want genuine stability in the region, then we should work for a comprehensive and just settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>526</sup>

From Baker’s perspective, despite disapproval from Dennis Ross, he felt that Syria’s participation was of very important symbolic value: ‘With Syria represented, the credibility of our Arab coalition partners was immeasurably strengthened’. But as he also stated, he had a more long-term plan, and he felt that, ‘There was no way to move a comprehensive Mideast peace process forward without the active involvement of Syria.’<sup>527</sup> Bush reinforced this position when he told Baker: ‘I think you should consider going to Syria. I don’t want to miss the boat again’.

This demonstrates the difference with which this administration considered the role of Syria compared to previous and subsequent administrations.<sup>528</sup> In public, the US did not want to make the linkage between intervention in the Gulf and the Arab-Israeli conflict, for fear that Saddam Hussein would use it to sow disunity among the Arabs.<sup>529</sup> But in private, particularly when trying to secure Syria’s support, the US was very clear that it intended to build on the coalition that had been formed to work for a comprehensive peace plan after the Gulf crisis, stating:

We’re optimistic that the circumstances that bring Syria, Egypt, and the Gulf states together in a major Arab coalition can augur well for the future of the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Author’s interview with Ghayth Armanazi.

<sup>526</sup> Press conference, Baker and FM Farouk Sharaa, Damascus international airport, 14/9/1990: Baker’s trip to Persian gulf, Helsinki summit, Moscow ministerial, Europe: RG 59, press materials for the Secretary’s trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

<sup>527</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 296

<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

<sup>529</sup> Press conference, Baker and FM farouk sharaa, Damascus international airport, 14/9/1990: Baker’s trip to Persian gulf, Helsinki summit, Moscow ministerial, Europe: RG 59, press materials for the Secretary’s trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

<sup>530</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 298

If we assess the outcomes of Syria's participation in the coalition against Iraq, we can see that a key winner was the Middle East peace process, and not necessarily Syria on its own. Syria did gain from its participation – the Gulf War had left Syria 'in a stronger position with regard to virtually all of its major regional concerns'<sup>531</sup> It was more involved in matters of regional security, and saw more consultation with Egypt and the Gulf states reflected by the fact the GCC met in Damascus to discuss regional security. But these gains in international recognition were needed to counter the damage of years of international isolation; moreover it was not just recognition for the sake of prestige, but rather it gave Syria greater leverage in the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was Syria's involvement which led the US to realise that 'it could no longer seek to exclude [Syria] from any role in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict'.<sup>532</sup> And Syria felt its inclusion was needed to provide an alternative voice to that of Israel and the pro-American Arab states in that arena.

In terms of economic and material advantage, we can see that this certainly did act as a motivating factor for other regional states who joined the coalition. In the run-up to the Gulf War as the US sought to secure its coalition partners, it ended up forgiving Egypt its \$7.1 billion of debt.<sup>533</sup> Similarly when Turkey agreed to provide its bases for the US military, it required an increase in World Bank loans which were raised to \$1-1.5 billion. Thus clearly much of the bandwagoning with the US, even among long-term allies, was partially motivated by financial aid. It is worth noting that Syria did not benefit from any such loans or debt repayments in return for its participation in the coalition. Moreover, the US secured Syrian support even before promising that the Saudis would pay for Syria's 'expeditionary costs'.

This demonstrates that Syria's cooperation with the US on this occasion was limited as a strategic move; it reflected a mix of a perceived principled necessity with the intention of furthering the Arabs' cause in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the need to be cautious about alienating the US too much in a new unipolar system.<sup>534</sup> But it did not appear to be seeking a wholesale change in its policy, such as Egypt under Sadat, and thus it would be inaccurate to view this episode as a realignment of ideology. If it had sought a deeper alliance with the

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<sup>531</sup> John Lunn, *The Middle East and North Africa*, 1028

<sup>532</sup> Lunn, *The Middle East*, 1028

<sup>533</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 291, 285.

<sup>534</sup> This provides a good example of the pragmatism in Syrian ideology, and seemingly was a decision that paid off both for Syria's strategic and ideological interests, as will be demonstrated with the start of the Madrid process; this is further supported when compared with the case of Jordan, who had supported Iraq and had to make great concessions after the Gulf War in order to avoid being isolated by the US.

US, it might have asked more freely for financial aid knowing that the US would in turn have expectations of greater political compliance from Syria in future; this was not the case.

Overall, it was the Gulf War and the coalition that was formed with the Arabs, and America's consensus with the Soviet Union, that launched a renewed Middle East peace process.<sup>535</sup> America's handling of the crisis, the evident concern it had shown to build up a coalition of all Arab parties,<sup>536</sup> and its standing by its promises to seek a comprehensive resolution to the Arab-Israel conflict afterwards, helped to remove some of the intense mistrust that had developed between both Syria and the US over the years. And unlike on previous occasions, it seemed this trust was valued by the US administration and which it did not want to lose. Baker stated after Desert Storm was over, that he wanted to return to the idea of the Middle East peace process, reflecting that 'having given my word in this regard, I felt a moral obligation to follow through.'<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 277

<sup>536</sup> Background briefing by administration official, Ankara, 9/8/1990, file: trip of Secretary Baker to Ankara, RG 59, press materials for the Secretary's trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7: In which Asad was said to have recognised the effort the US had undertaken to achieve consensus.

<sup>537</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 414

## 6.2 The Launch of the Madrid Talks – Breakthrough in the Middle East

In October 1991, the Arab parties, Israel, the US and the Soviet Union met at a peace conference in Madrid in order to reach a final peace agreement. Given the failures of the previous attempts, this might have seemed idealistic. But there were a number of important differences between the post-Gulf War and post-October War contexts. Firstly, the end of the Cold War signalled a new era in which the US was able to engage with the Middle East without constantly framing its policies in anticipation of the USSR's actions. This allowed them a greater level of flexibility in facilitating the interests of the Middle East states. Secondly, the US had managed to forge much closer links with all the Arab states, including Syria, after the successful coalition across ideological lines against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War; it was a time in which, as James Baker put it, the US 'stood at the zenith of [its] influence in the Middle East'.<sup>538</sup> The mood towards the US was certainly more conciliatory compared to the antagonistic atmosphere immediately following Arab-Israeli hostilities in 1973. Thirdly, the American president George Bush appeared to be less overtly ideological or pro-Israel than Reagan,<sup>539</sup> and was more forceful in condemning the spread of settlements.<sup>540</sup> This greater even-handedness aided greater trust from the Arab side of negotiations. This relationship of trust was strengthened by the fact that major figures in the State Department were accepted by all parties as having no particular personal connections with either the Israeli or Arab sides.<sup>541</sup>

This atmosphere of optimism and sense of opportunity was followed up with concrete achievements in deciding the format and procedure of the talks. Given the dissatisfaction over even basic arrangements on previous occasions, these marked a breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli conflict at that time:

(1) It was the first time that all the parties were involved in peace talks collectively, and speaking to each other directly. Since 1967 Syria had been consistent in demanding Palestinian inclusion in any talks, and its demand in return for cooperation in the Gulf War had been for a comprehensive peace settlement.<sup>542</sup> Both premises were accepted as a

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<sup>538</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 414-15 passim.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid. 116

<sup>540</sup> Ibid. 122-3

<sup>541</sup> In fact White House Chief of Staff was the Lebanese John Sununu.

<sup>542</sup> Helena Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks, 1991-96 and Beyond* (United States Institute of Peace, 1999), xi.

fundamental condition for the first time in any negotiations.<sup>543</sup> Thus the incentive for Syrian cooperation was greater, or from a sceptical US perspective the incentive for obstructionism was therefore minimised.

(2) All parties eventually agreed to the format and content of the negotiations, which had remained contested during the Disengagement talks. At first there were deep conflicting goals that appeared to be irresolvable: Israel did not want to focus on territorial issues at all. Yitzhak Shamir, the Israeli Prime Minister and leader of the right-wing Likud party, was clear in his unwillingness to relinquish any territory. Shamir reminded the US that President Ford had virtually promised Israel that it could remain on the Golan;<sup>544</sup> this stunted talks before they even started, for there was no basis for discussion without the notorious but now accepted land for peace formula initiated by Kissinger. Facing an impasse, Baker put forward the proposition that if Israel did agree to withdraw from the Golan, US troops might be stationed there instead of directly handing it over to Syrian military control.<sup>545</sup> To this Shamir is recorded to have retracted his refusal to withdraw.<sup>546</sup> Thus the all important agreement to withdraw *seemed* to have been extracted from Israel at this stage.

In direct contrast to Israel, Syria was adamant that the only basis on which it would participate was if the talks pursued the existing UN resolutions, particularly 242, stipulating the return of Arab territory.<sup>547</sup> Syria's demands were not only restricted to Syrian land but were applied to all Arab territories occupied by Israel. Also in opposition to Israel, Syria still argued for joint discussions and contested bilateral deals, and also preferred to have the UN as mediators rather than the US. If Syria was only concerned in regaining the Golan as some analysts have suggested, it would not have shown such consistent opposition to bilateral deals, which as Egypt had demonstrated were in fact more conducive to a state's self interests. But instead, Foreign Minister Sharaa and Syria's delegate to Madrid, stated that the implementation of UN resolutions:

Should not be the subject of new bargaining during bilateral organisation. Rather they should be implemented in all provisions and on all fronts...This means that every inch of Arab land occupied by the Israelis by war and force, the Golan, the

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<sup>543</sup>The Palestinians were present, although not under the name of the PLO but under a joint delegation with the Jordanians.

<sup>544</sup> See chapter 5, plus Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 424.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Cobban, *Peace-Talks*, 26; Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 424

<sup>547</sup> A demand reiterated throughout the talks, and two years later in 1995. See Warren Christopher, *Chances of A Lifetime* (Scribner, 2001), 219.

West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza strip, must be returned in their entirety to their legitimate owners.<sup>548</sup>

To overcome this impasse, the US firstly agreed to work on the basis of UN resolution 242, which had been largely sidelined during the Disengagement agreements.<sup>549</sup> Secondly, it maintained that talks should be conducted on a mixed basis of both bilateral talks (to produce reciprocal compromises for all parties), and multilateral talks (for region-wide issues). While Sharaa noted his and other Arabs' opposition to any bilateral talks, which they saw as a divide and rule tactic,<sup>550</sup> their acceptance of the compromised format for the pre-negotiation phase marked the first concession by the Syrians to facilitate the progress of the talks. They still hoped for a common Arab approach and Arab coordination among the negotiators; but the promise of multilateral talks on region-wide issues partially placated the Syrians for now. Thus both Syria and Israel made important concessions before talks could even begin.

(3) There was further promise at the start of the Madrid talks due to an important change in the approach of the US administration itself, particularly towards Syria. Though not relating to the actual content or format, this had a significant bearing on the direction of talks under the Bush administration. In all previous talks, Syria's role was merely seen as being instrumental in persuading other Arab parties to participate – a resolution that would also satisfy Syria's demands was not one of America's goals, and indeed when the main priority of Israeli-Egyptian peace had been secured at Camp David the Syrian-Israeli front became neglected. In contrast, Baker stated with regards to the Madrid talks that:

With Syria represented, the credibility of our Arab coalition partners was immeasurably strengthened. But I had a more long-term purpose in mind. There was no way to move a comprehensive Mideast peace process forward without the active involvement of Syria...<sup>551</sup>

Both Baker and Bush saw Syria as having more than just a symbolic part to play in the peace-talks; rather they felt that peace on the Syrian-Israeli front could unlock the impasse on other fronts and thereby lead to the comprehensive peace that was so needed in the

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<sup>548</sup> Cited in Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 17.

<sup>549</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 118. Baker and Bush went to great lengths to outline to Shamir and the Likud party in power the importance of Palestinian rights; this was outlined even in the annual AIPAC speech, despite unpopularity with the audience and denounced by Shamir as 'useless' and decried by the American-Jewish community. See Ibid, 122. These efforts will have demonstrated important impartiality to the Arabs.

<sup>550</sup> Djerejian, Baker's trip to Persian gulf, Helsinki summit, Moscow ministerial, Europe: RG 59, press materials for the Secretary's trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

<sup>551</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 295-296

region. Thus Syria was viewed with greater importance than it was under Nixon and Kissinger and their successors.

### 6.2.1 Stalemate

However, despite such positive foundations, a stalemate ensued in the early phase of negotiations. There could be no progress if all sides were not willing to make compromises – Syria, for its part signalled willingness to do so if their conditions were met. By March 1992, they had signalled a commitment to: end the conflict with Israel and to sign a peace treaty with Israel based on a comprehensive peace plan between Arabs and Israelis, although in reality Syria's vision of any treaty was closer to a non-belligerency pact than full normalisation that the Israelis were seeking.<sup>552</sup> These were significant offers, but notably based on clear conditions, these being: Israeli withdrawal from all Arab lands occupied from 4 June 1967 and the fulfilment of Palestinian rights.<sup>553</sup> For a while Asad still maintained his demand that the Madrid conference be held under UN auspices. But ultimately after much shuttle diplomacy, Asad was willing to have just a UN spokesperson at the conference and accepted the invitation. According to Baker, this was the single most important factor to ensure the conference went ahead.<sup>554</sup>

On the Israeli side, however, American diplomacy seemed to have less effect. Cobban states:

To be sure, as long as Shamir's government remained in power, it is fair to say that no substantive progress was made on this track – or, indeed, on any of the other tracks – of the Madrid-launched peace process.<sup>555</sup>

Having agreed to enter talks after Baker's offer of US troops on the Golan, Israel showed unwillingness to give any commitment to withdrawal, and mooted instead the idea of reciprocal territorial exchanges between Israel and Syria<sup>556</sup> – something which was

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<sup>552</sup> Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 333

<sup>553</sup> Djerejian, Baker's trip to Persian gulf, Helsinki summit, Moscow ministerial, Europe: RG 59, press materials for the Secretary's trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7; Warren Christopher, *Chances of A Lifetime* (Scribner 2001), 219; Shlaim, *The Iron Wall- Israel and the Arab World* (W.W.Norton and Company, 2001), 531-533. Syria's stipulation of the 4<sup>th</sup> June boundary line was clear from the start; hence Israel and America's surprise at Asad's insistence of this boundary in 1994, perceiving it as a new condition from Syria, seems unjustified.

<sup>554</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 489

<sup>555</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 40

<sup>556</sup> Put forward by Yossi Ben-Aharon, Israel's head negotiator on the Syrian track. See *Ibid*, 41. Meanwhile in an interview with Patrick Seale in 1999, Shamir stated that Israel wanted to find a compromise but had not been interested in 'a territorial compromise' with Asad, who he described as 'the enemy of Israel'. See "Shamir: The Golan is more important", cited in Cobban, 40.

unthinkable for the Syrians. This was labelled as intransigence by Israel, but Syria argued that its terms for full withdrawal merely echoed UNSCR 242, and was therefore entirely justified. Moreover on the Palestinian front, despite releasing 1200 prisoners captured during the Intifada in April 1991, Israel continued to build settlements in the occupied territories (with an announcement that 13,000 new units of housing would be built over three years).<sup>557</sup> Baker stated that he saw these moves as ‘a deliberate effort to sabotage peace’.<sup>558</sup>

This stalemate ate up valuable time and much of the optimism that the talks had started out with. By October 1991, the 120 day period in which Bush and Baker had set to push for as much progress as possible, was coming to an end. In this time, Israel’s relations with the US were also tense.<sup>559</sup> Baker announced that the US administration would grant the entire \$10 billion loan that Israel requested, on condition that Israel froze all settlement activity in the occupied territory – any money Israel spent on finishing construction that it had already started before, would result in a deduction from the loan – thus ensuring that no loan money would go towards settlement construction.<sup>560</sup> Pro-Israeli senators proposed more favourable terms, but Bush threatened to veto such proposals for fear that it would destroy the fragile peace talks. In the end, the foreign aid bill was passed in the US without the usual loan guarantees for Israel.<sup>561</sup> According to Baker this had a significant impact on the Israeli elections – while one might expect it to have led to increased nationalism in Israel thus keeping the Likud government in power, the reverse happened with Labour winning Israel’s elections in June 1992, and Yitzhak Rabin coming to power.<sup>562</sup>

While it is difficult to ascertain, it is very likely that this episode had some impact on the American presidential elections as well. This assertive move by the Bush administration made it particularly unpopular among the Israeli lobby in the US. While it is inaccurate and simplistic to attribute too much influence to the American-Israeli lobby, it should not be dismissed either. Then, as now, it held important ties in the economy and politics, and was one of the oldest and best-established lobby groups in the US. Thus Bush’s challenge to Shamir also strengthened Jewish-American support for the Democrat opposition.<sup>563</sup>

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<sup>557</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 444-446

<sup>558</sup> Ibid., 446

<sup>559</sup> Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 42

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 544

<sup>561</sup> This was according to Baker only the second time AIPAC had been defeated on a ‘legislative initiative’ in Congress - Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 128.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 541

<sup>563</sup> As was anticipated by Baker, (Ibid, 551), who stated that ‘in a full-fledged fight with AIPAC, the risks to the administration would be substantial’. Also see Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, *The Israeli*



Bush was ultimately defeated in the US elections, bringing in a new Democrat administration and Bill Clinton as President. It was this administration that would be in charge of mediating the talks until 1996 when they eventually broke down.

### 6.3 Transition from Bush to Clinton

The changes in the Israeli Knesset and US administration had an important impact on the peace process. On the Israeli side, Rabin showed himself to be more open to negotiations than Shamir; this opened up a second phase of negotiations that provided more opportunities for progress. Rabin began negotiations with the Syrians in August 1992 with a mutually acceptable foundation for both sides – the acceptance of the territorial condition in Resolution 242, stipulating the withdrawal from all occupied territories, reciprocated by security guarantees.<sup>564</sup>

During this round of talks the Syrians submitted via their chief negotiator, Walid Muallem<sup>565</sup>, a document laying out an agenda and declaration of principles for the talks. These came under four sections: withdrawal; security arrangements; normal peaceful relations; and 'timetable for fulfilment'.<sup>566</sup> The analogy of 'four legs of a table' was used frequently to refer to this plan, particularly by Rabin, and was recognised by all sides, including Israel, as a significant step by the Syrians who had never put forward such a clear intent for a resolution up until now – indeed it formed the basis of all future discussions.<sup>567</sup>

Despite this positive signal, a second break to proceedings ensued, firstly due to the changeover between the Bush and Clinton administrations. This effectively meant the American mediators were seen as members of a 'lame-duck' government, and meant the negotiations were 'rudderless' during the transition period.<sup>568</sup> This was coupled with a flare-up between Israeli soldiers and Hamas on the Gaza border. When three Israeli soldiers were killed, Rabin responded by ordering the deportation of four hundred suspected Palestinian activists into North Lebanon. This heightened Arab anger and evoked fears from previous expulsions of Palestinians by the IDF, prompting all the Arab parties including Syria to suspend participation in the talks.

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<sup>564</sup> Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, p. 532

<sup>565</sup> Muallem succeeded Syria's first delegate Muwaffaq Al-Allaf

<sup>566</sup> Walid Al-Moualem, 'Fresh Light in the Syrian-Israeli Peace Negotiations', *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXXVI, no. 2, (Winter 1997), 84; Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 534; Shlaim argues that Israel did accept resolution 242 as the basis for negotiations. Rabinovich however argues that Israel made the 'opening gambit' by halting settlement construction on the West Bank, to which Syria responded with draft principles that were 'totally unacceptable' to the Israelis (See Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*. 45), but which Israel was willing to overlook to enable progress. If so, this would explain why there were significant and foundational discrepancies at the latter stage of talks – nevertheless, Rabin himself appeared to use the draft principles as a reference point during negotiations.

<sup>567</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 46

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*; Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 48

Thus when the Clinton administration came into office in January 1993, there were no negotiations in process. To an extent this hiatus suited the Clinton administration – firstly it allowed them to focus on the crisis in Bosnia, which was of more pressing concern to them at the time. Secondly, according to Samuel Lewis the new head of Policy Planning at the State Department, the Democrat administration had ‘close links to many parts of the American Jewish community’ and so ‘was not about to do anything to cause an open crisis with Israel’.<sup>569</sup> They had learnt the lessons of their predecessors, and were not wishing to make themselves unpopular so early on in government.

### **6.3.1 From Oslo to COS I**

Dramatic and unexpected events in September 1993 brought the world’s attention back to the peace process. Rabin and the PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat signed the first ever agreement between Israel and a Palestinian representative. This was unexpected not least because it came after a deadlock in the talks and was particularly surprising given Israel’s recent actions against the Palestinian activists. Moreover the US had been slow in following up the peace process, which in the summer appeared to be in jeopardy. It was clear therefore that this sudden deal was a result of *secret* negotiations solely between the Israelis and Palestinians, which the Syrians had been kept in the dark about.

After initial procrastination, Clinton now pushed for a resumption of talks on the Syrian-Israeli front. However, it was not just Syria who had reservations about the impact of the Oslo accords. Rabin feared that any deal with Syria so soon afterwards would turn Israeli public opinion against him. He persuaded Clinton to postpone any talks with Syria until the end of the year. Such was the perceived breakthrough of the Oslo accords that it convinced Clinton that he ‘was on the right track in letting Rabin take the lead on peace process issues’,<sup>570</sup> and thus he delegated Rabin with even more leadership as a result. Despite their frustration at yet another delay, the Syrians nevertheless agreed to wait and even mustered some positive enthusiasm in time for the US-organised Geneva summit in January 1994 in anticipation of concrete developments, stating ‘we are ready to sign peace now’.<sup>571</sup> Evidently the Palestinian-Israeli deal had motivated Syria in its search for a settlement as well.

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<sup>569</sup> Cobban interview with Samuel Lewis, former US Ambassador to Israel, *Peace Talks*, 47

<sup>570</sup> Samuel Lewis, interview with Cobban, cited in *Ibid*, 61

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, quoting Asad in news conference, shown on Syrian Arabic news channel.

However, such readiness by the Syrians was dampened by Israel's declaration that any agreement over the Golan Heights would be put to the Israeli people in a referendum.<sup>572</sup> This was coupled by a new obstacle concerning the very foundations of the peace talks. Rabin was now having doubts about the term 'full withdrawal' from the Golan. Having earlier given an apparent commitment to the US and the Syrians when he took over as Prime Minister,<sup>573</sup> he now clarified his position to US Secretary of State Warren Christopher that he was only offering full withdrawal (to the 4 June 1967 lines) as a *hypothetical* situation merely to gauge Syria's response, rather than as a conditional commitment.<sup>574</sup> It was a crucial difference, but presented with sufficient ambiguity as to not yet obstruct the talks; for example, Syria interpreted Rabin's clarification as confirmation of his initial commitment. This is demonstrated by Sharaa's comments that the *apparently* shared understanding of the final objectives of talks 'made a lot of changes and enhanced the confidence of both sides'.<sup>575</sup>

Once again, as had occurred in the summer of 1993, developments on another track diverted Israel and America's attention away from the Syrian negotiations for the third time at a critical stage. This time it was a breakthrough on the Jordanian front – on 25 July, both Israel and Jordan had agreed to the principles for a formal peace treaty, pledging to achieve this within two months.<sup>576</sup> This again exacerbated the pressure on Syria and undermined the comprehensive premise of the talks that Syria had fought so long for.

Talks resumed for a third time after this pause. With the agenda *seemingly* agreed upon, Clinton urged both parties to move on to the second leg of negotiations concerning security. He proposed that these discussions be conducted with Syria and Israel's military chiefs of

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<sup>572</sup> In doing so 'Rabin made the worst mistake' as it undermined negotiations, according to Dr. Martha Kessler, Author's interview, Washington DC, May 2009

<sup>573</sup> Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 327 & 333: According to Lesch Israel is reported to have given this commitment to the American intermediaries without putting it in writing or announcing it themselves, some argued so that they could deny it if negotiations collapsed. Rabinovich, however, argues that Syria chose to ignore the distinction between what he calls Israel's 'hypothetical deposition' and a formal 'commitment' (*Waging Peace*, 56-7). Whether Israel did or did not make a formal commitment to withdraw to the pre-war lines remained an issue of contention even when talks were started again under Ehud Barak in 1998. But it remains the case that Syria would not have even agreed to enter into negotiations if this agreement had not been secured.

<sup>574</sup> Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 221

<sup>575</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 63, interview with Farouk Sharaa

<sup>576</sup> The treaty was signed on 25 July 1994. In order to confirm the deal, the US wiped out Jordan's debt to the US to the sum of \$700million, and arranged \$200 million funding and support for modernising Jordan's army. (see Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 214). Such arrangements were typical of the incentives used to secure the cooperation of parties in the peace process. The financial 'carrot' for signing peace with Israel was therefore substantial.

staff rather than the political leaders. C.O.S (I),<sup>577</sup> as the first round of security discussions became known, was led by Hikmat Shihabi on the Syrian side and Ehud Barak on the Israeli side on 21 December 1994. Ultimately it did not produce any fruits, with both sides conceding it to have been a failure.<sup>578</sup>

When talks restarted for a fourth time in May 1995, security arrangements were to be discussed once again, but this time with the input of the political leadership first, to avoid the farce of COS-I. These talks were far more substantive than those that had preceded it, with US Secretary of State Warren Christopher shuttling between Israel and Syria and Sharaa visiting Washington to make significant contributions to the drafting of terms known as the 'Aims and Principles' document.

### **6.3.2 From COS II to the Breakdown of Talks**

Despite the ambiguity built into the Aims and Principles document (more of which will be discussed later on), all parties were prepared to move on to the implementation phase of the terms through a second round of COS talks. The main problem the Israelis were facing at this stage was breaking the news of their intention to withdraw from the Golan to their public; having implied this commitment to Syria and the mediators, the leaders were now reluctant to announce this openly.<sup>579</sup> Each time Rabin was queried about the agreed demarcation line, he used the ambiguity created in negotiations to shield the extent of his agreements with Syria and the US from the public.<sup>580</sup> In contrast, Shimon Peres was far more vocal about the commitments Israel was expected to make in these negotiations. Hoping it might placate public opinion, he compared giving up the Golan to the precedent set by a Likud government which gave up the Sinai; and noted that like Gaza, the Golan did not constitute sacred land for the Israelis.<sup>581</sup>

I am convinced we must not hesitate and must not allow the chances of a comprehensive peace in the Middle East slip between our fingers...There are no tricks here, we have two truths and we must choose one: remaining on the Golan Heights means giving up peace.<sup>582</sup>

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<sup>577</sup> Abbreviation for 'Chiefs of Staff'

<sup>578</sup> Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 535

<sup>579</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 77

<sup>580</sup> A similar strategy was adopted in relation the final status aims for the Oslo agreement, see Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 329-330

<sup>581</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 78-9

<sup>582</sup> 'Peres views price of Peace with Syria', Haaretz (Tel Aviv), 26 May 1995, Cited in Ibid.

These hints from the government were seized upon by Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu who used these statements to whip up more frenzy and opposition against the peace process among the Israeli public.<sup>583</sup> The mention of possible evacuation of settlements galvanised the Israeli settlers, the most hostile to the peace process, into greater opposition towards it.<sup>584</sup> Anti-withdrawal activists began campaigning at the Knesset to protect the 'Golan law' of 1981 through which Israel had formally (but illegally) annexed the Golan – a majority vote would have to be passed to allow any amendments to the law. Furthermore hundreds of demonstrators protested against Rabin and clashed with the police.<sup>585</sup> Amidst an already volatile situation, the extent of withdrawal demanded and expected by the negotiating parties was leaked to the press, most likely by a participant present at the meetings.

Against this backdrop the COS II talks continued dealing with sensitive discussions about the Aims and Principles document and its implementation. And yet further issues arose that complicated matters and soured the atmosphere in the negotiations. The Israeli delegate General Tzvi Shtaubert's papers were leaked to the Israeli press. His document emphasised the military advantages of the positions currently occupied by Israel on the Golan, and highlighted Syria's demands for them to be demilitarized altogether after withdrawal – this stirred up greater fervour among Israelis about the need to retain the Golan.<sup>586</sup> On 28 June, another blow to negotiations occurred. Yet another leak, this time from Netanyahu, disclosed to the Knesset a so-called 'document of concessions' discussed in the talks, which was then duly published in an Israeli newspaper the next day.<sup>587</sup> This information aggravated public opposition to any level of withdrawal.

Using this hostility as an opportunity to push for a change in the initial terms of agreement, Israel proposed that in addition to having US troops located on the Golan instead of Syrian troops, Israel should also maintain its own troops on the strategically vital Mount Hermon. Furthermore, Israel insisted on stationing an early warning system on the Golan.<sup>588</sup>

Syria was dismayed at these developments on two accounts: 1) it was angered about the leaks of the meetings to the Knesset and to the Israeli press, sensing that this demonstrated a

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<sup>583</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 80

<sup>584</sup> Madeleine Albright, *Madame Secretary*, Macmillan (2003), 475

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.* 81-82

<sup>586</sup> Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 331; Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 89

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91

<sup>588</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 86

lack of seriousness on the part of the Israelis.<sup>589</sup> In the end, according to Muallem, COS II never got round to discussing the third item on the agenda (the international forces) directly as a result of these leaks.<sup>590</sup> 2) The Syrians completely disputed Israel's demand to retain Mount Hermon and to station troops or an early warning system on the Golan as a disregard for Syria's sovereignty.<sup>591</sup> Thus Israel's latest demand was seen as being highly provocative.

Thereafter, both sides appeared to clamp down on previously agreed concessions. Due to the new demands being introduced in COS II, and the number of leaks, Asad no longer wished to engage in the military talks but to return to the diplomatic channels. This in turn was seen as 'bad faith' by Rabin who called it 'inflexibility'.<sup>592</sup> Thus the fourth attempt at negotiations had ended without success.

The extent of public hostility to the peace process in Israel provides the crucial context to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995 by a Jewish fundamentalist. The shock of Rabin's assassination brought the two sides back to the starting points of negotiations. Shimon Peres, both Rabin's long-term rival within the Labour party but also his partner in the peace process, took over as Prime Minister and immediately brought a very different approach to the negotiations. Whereas Rabin was slow and cautious, dealing with each track separately at a time, Peres wanted to move quickly and to negotiate each track simultaneously (although still bilaterally). By January 1996, the US considered the peace process to be back on track and despite the setbacks and numerous delays, reinitiated talks to finalise the agreements that had been made thus far.<sup>593</sup> According to Muallem, the expectation was that a final document from all sides would be ready by September 1996.<sup>594</sup>

Three significant events occurred to halt proceedings. The first, and arguably the most important, was Peres' decision on 25 January during the talks at the Wye Plantations to call

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<sup>589</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 96

<sup>590</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 87

<sup>591</sup> Ibid. From Israel's perspective, this seemed like a reasonable demand given that the size of Syria was much greater than Israel territorially (See Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, .65) For the Syrians this was unreasonable given Israel's far greater military capabilities that outweighed Syria's greater territorial size (see Muallem, 86)

<sup>592</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 99

<sup>593</sup> Muallem reported Dennis Ross as stating that, 'more had been achieved in two sessions of talks...than had been achieved in the entire previous four years'. 81-94

<sup>594</sup> Ibid, 81.

early elections in Israel.<sup>595</sup> The impact that elections and changes in government can have on such negotiations was already exemplified with the changeover from the Bush to the Clinton administration in the US. This change altered the direction and eventual outcome of the talks. Rabin's assassination undoubtedly already had an impact on negotiations, not only because his leadership had been such a marked change from the open intransigence of Yitzhak Shamir, but also because his negotiating style was distinctly cautious and slow-moving. However, while the style now changed under Peres, this was the same Labour government and the substance of Israel's negotiating terms had not. The call of elections, however, and the prospect of a Likud government coming to power, generated a sense of futility in any further proceedings.

Despite this, the US intimated they still wanted the talks to continue, and thus they were resumed in Maryland in February 1996. But shortly afterwards, the second event to affect negotiations took place. Two suicide bombs went off in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv between 25 February and 3 March 1996; Israel immediately informed the US and Syria that it had suspended the talks. Muallem states,

From that time of course, everything began to collapse. The international and Israeli focus shifted to combating terrorism.<sup>596</sup>

Two conferences were organised, one in Sharm El-Shaykh and another in Washington to discuss 'anti-terrorism'; but from then until the Israeli elections there was no further discussion of the peace process.

The third and final event to halt the talks occurred when on 31 May 1996 Peres and the Labour government lost the elections, and Benjamin Netanyahu, the hard-line Likud leader and perennial opponent of the peace talks, was voted into power. With that ended all further negotiations between Syria and Israel until 1998-2000 under a new Israeli government and Prime Minister.

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<sup>595</sup> Initially Peres intended to call elections for October 1996, hoping to have secured a peace deal with the Syrians by then; after trying to rush negotiations at too fast a pace, it became apparent that a full deal would take much longer. He feared a situation where he would be going into the polls with only half a deal (i.e. withdrawal from the Golan, but no security arrangements), thus turning the public against him. Hence he brought elections forward to May. See Rabinovich, 2004, pp. 72-4

<sup>596</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 81



## 6.4 Implications for US-Syrian relations

During Bush's tenure as US president, with James Baker as his secretary of state, it is arguable that US-Syrian relations were at their most cooperative. On the American side, there was a higher degree of empathy for Syria's position, both in terms of its regional role and Syria's concern about public opinion. Moreover the administration recognised Syria's importance to the viability of peace in the Middle East more than any preceding US government; as a result it was anxious to involve the Syrians rather than marginalise them, and gave more consideration to Syrian demands as issues that needed to be resolved if there was any chance of achieving peace.

On the Syrian side, both American rhetoric and actions instilled in them a greater level of trust. The greater attempt on the part of the US to be and also appear more even-handed in its approach to both Arabs and Israelis had an impact. Notably the withholding of the US loan to Israel due to continued settlement building, despite the negative political fall-out in the US, demonstrated to the Syrians the seriousness of US intentions for a comprehensive peace in the region. In a rare vote of confidence in the US, Asad stated to Baker:

We have come to the conclusion that you are strong and decisive, you say what you mean, and this makes us believe that you are a straightforward man. It's important that a person be frank and direct, whether or not we agree. When these qualities are there, even if there is no agreement, there is trust.<sup>597</sup>

And although the 'special relationship' was never in danger, it was notable that improved US-Syrian cooperation coincided with a nadir in America's relations with Israel under Shamir. It was one of the rare occasions during negotiations since 1973 when the US acknowledged that Israel was displaying the greatest intransigence of all the parties, rather than laying the blame with the Arabs, and was prepared to make this public if Israel continued to obfuscate.<sup>598</sup> The lack of overt bias despite America's historical and unavoidable connections with Israel, demonstrated that firstly, relative impartiality could be achieved by a US administration - Israel's opposition to US demands for an end to settlement construction did not demonstrate that the Bush-Baker camp was favouring the Arabs, as some in Israel interpreted (the settlements were, after all, in contravention of the Geneva Convention and thus the US were merely upholding international law), but rather the extent of American leniency towards Israel in the past. This shift in America's approach as

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<sup>597</sup> Asad to Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 297

<sup>598</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 505-7

mediators also could be seen as a significant change from Kissinger's diplomacy. And secondly, greater even-handedness had a significant impact on Syria's responsiveness to US efforts and willingness to seriously invest in the peace process.<sup>599</sup>

Under the Clinton administration, however, relations between Syria and the US took a downturn. Syria maintained in the aftermath of the failed negotiations that they were satisfied with the US' role as mediators. Muallem described them as 'moderators, brokers, even partners...' in the talks.<sup>600</sup> He highlighted the instrumental role of the US in bringing both sides back to the table after the COS I talks had failed, by drafting and pushing forward the Aims and Principles document outlining security arrangements.<sup>601</sup> Without this talks would not have resumed by June 1995. Thus there clearly were times when the US as mediators sought to push the peace process forward and without their input it would not have progressed.<sup>602</sup> However, several aspects to America's approach to mediating, which then affected Syrian perceptions of the US role, can be identified.

Firstly, there was an important change between the Bush and Clinton administrations. With the Bush administration, the relationship with Israel was based on the traditional ties between both *states* over the decades and was largely a political connection. Under the Clinton administration, the relationship with Israel was deeper. There were greater personal connections among the staff, many of whom on the American side were of a Jewish background.<sup>603</sup> This was particularly the case in the State Department, which had the greatest involvement in the peace process and greatest interaction with the Arab parties. The administration also depended a lot more on political support from the Jewish American community.<sup>604</sup> And finally, there was simply greater affinity and personal bonds between the leaders. Clinton developed a close personal friendship with Rabin – indeed over the years Clinton came to see Rabin as a mentor, even a 'father figure', and communicated with

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<sup>599</sup> See Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 45 - who acknowledges that for once Asad showed real willingness to reach a genuine agreement in response to American efforts.

<sup>600</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 83

<sup>601</sup> Ibid.

<sup>602</sup> For example, Rabinovich argues that after the Oslo agreement, the US felt ' beholden ' to Syria and wanted Israel to return to Syria track, not to Jordan. In general he argues that the US preferred Israel to go with the Syrian track (see *Waging Peace*, 59; and .72). Others, such as Shlaim, argue that it was Israel who adopted the 'Syria first' policy because it seemed more straightforward.

<sup>603</sup> Author's interview with Martha Kessler, Washington DC, May 2009

<sup>604</sup> Ibid. Kessler stated: 'There are lots of organisations that are extremely wealthy and totally willing to exert their influence; [they] have an unsophisticated "Israel, right or wrong" policy, and I am not sure the Clinton administration were sophisticated enough and equipped to deal with that, and could not override the Israeli lobby.'

him over even the smallest details of the peace process.<sup>605</sup> Apart from regular meetings – Rabin would meet with Clinton face-to-face twice yearly – the two leaders were in telephone contact regularly. This was nothing like his relations with the Arab counterparts, whom he rarely met and usually conveyed information to via the intermediaries in negotiations, his Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Dennis Ross from the State Department.<sup>606</sup>

However, America's close alliance with another state, and the racial or religious background of its staff alone cannot be cited as reason enough for the continued grudge between the US and Syria. It was the perceived impact on US conduct as mediators that caused friction. The pace of the talks seemed to be determined by Israel's wishes, with little intervention by the US when talks were postponed or stalled. Israel was not adequately challenged by the US when introducing new elements to the negotiations that were not a part of the originally agreed terms, such as early warning systems on Mount Hermon and the suggestion to put full withdrawal to a popular referendum. And when Israel engaged in acts of belligerence in the region, they were not condemned by the US nor was pressure placed on Israel to desist. Indeed, the Syrians were acutely aware that much of Israel's firepower was sponsored by the US. In answer to the question posed – 'have the Americans been true to their role as honest broker?', Muallem replied:

This is difficult to answer. Of course you cannot compare the Americans' relations with Syria with their relations with Israel, but at least we are satisfied with their role.<sup>607</sup>

The last words are those of a diplomat, bearing in mind that Walid Muallem had been the Syrian Ambassador to the US; it is the first reply that, in its ambivalence, is more indicative of the Syrian view of the US as mediators.

Secondly, there is no evidence that the new administration did recognise the value of Syria's role in the peace process in the same way that Baker expressed in his memoirs. Unsurprisingly, given the regular extent of Israeli-American communication, the US were 'mindful' and highly sympathetic to the constraints faced by Rabin at home in moving forward on the peace process, feeling that he had done much to change his views, whereas in

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<sup>605</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 56 – citing David Remnick, quoting Eitan Haber; also see Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 49, who describes it as a 'warm personal relationship'.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid.

<sup>607</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 91

contrast it felt Syria ‘was not doing as much reframing’ of their views towards Israel<sup>608</sup> –this, despite the fact that the ideas for a constructive plan to work with and calls for greater urgency had come from the Syrian side, as opposed to the frequent stalling from Israel. Furthermore, Asad’s response to Rabin’s hypothetical offer, in which he insisted on demanding first withdrawal and then discussions on normalisation as was agreed from the outset, was described as ‘an unimaginative and unyielding response’ by Christopher.<sup>609</sup> He went on to note that Asad had made a ‘new, highly controversial demand’ for a return to the pre-1967 Syrian-Israeli border – a demand that in fact Syria had always maintained during any negotiations.<sup>610</sup> Exemplifying the contrasting perceptions that the US held of Israel and Syria, Christopher expressed his view that:

Rabin had shown himself to be a visionary by allowing me to present Assad with the possibility of a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. Assad, however, appeared paralyzed in the face of this historic opportunity.<sup>611</sup>

This assessment fails to acknowledge the additional requests by Israel to station troops on the Golan even after withdrawal, and the fact that Israel’s ‘breakthrough’ offer of withdrawal was nothing new. It had in fact been the only reason why Syria had agreed to participate in talks in the first place.

Thus with the Clinton administration there was a return to the perceptions of Syrian intransigence and obstructionism that were held by Kissinger and held sway with the US administrations of old. The Bush administration had been interested in recognising Syria’s efforts by agreeing to reassess the sanctions that had been placed on Syria since 1967 and 1979, and to potentially reconsider Syria’s position on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.<sup>612</sup> In contrast, no such moves were contemplated by the Clinton administration. The lack of reciprocal movement by the US towards Syria under Clinton was noted by Muallem:

There was...pressure in that our relations with the United States never progressed during the four or five years of this process; to the contrary, we were kept on the

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<sup>608</sup> See Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 57 – interview with senior US official

<sup>609</sup> Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 222

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, 224

<sup>612</sup> Incoming telegram, unclassified, ambassador Djerejian background briefing remarks to journalists in Damascus, 14/9/1990 prior to Baker’s visit; Djerejian, Baker’s trip to Persian gulf, Helsinki summit, Moscow ministerial, Europe: RG 59, press materials for the Secretary’s trips 1989-1993, UDWW8, Box 7

American “blacklist,” and Congress tried to adopt additional measures this Summer [of 1997].<sup>613</sup>

The overall impact of the negotiation process on US-Syrian relations then was negative. From a positive start under the Bush administration, Syria’s confidence in the US as neutral mediators deteriorated under Clinton.<sup>614</sup> This continued throughout the stagnant years of the Likud government. While there was a window of opportunity remaining for peace during Ehud Barak’s Labour government in 1998, continued Israeli leaks and the perception that the US was not taking the Syrian-Israeli track seriously enough exacerbated Syria’s lack of trust in the US. Syria’s disdain for the American approach rose to a peak during the Shephardstown talks, which ended dismally without resolution despite a last-gasp attempt by the Americans to respond to what had been significant overtures for peace from Syria.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>613</sup> Muallem, *A Fresh Light*, 88

<sup>614</sup> Flynt Leverett even described the Clinton period as 'a disaster', adding: 'it didn't produce anything and did real damage in its failure.', Author's interview, Washington DC, June 2009.

<sup>615</sup> For full accounts of the Syrian-Israeli talks between 1998-2000, see: Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace, The Inside Story of the Fight for the Middle East* (FSG, 2004), 509-590; Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 502-597.

## 6.5 Explaining the Failure of the Madrid Process

Why is there a need to understand the reasons or explanations behind the failure of the peace process in the mid 1990s, and how does this build into the argument of the thesis? Firstly, the failure of the talks had a significant impact on US-Syrian relations. It generated lasting impressions on both sides, which meant that the rare opportunity for reconciliation after the Gulf crisis was not capitalised on, and instead further seeds of mistrust were sown for the rest of the decade.

Given the above, it is therefore important to understand what caused the talks to fail in the first place, as an underlying cause behind continuing ambivalence in US-relations. One of the outcomes of the talks was a perception on the American side that Syria had not done enough to cooperate during negotiations, and had demonstrated inflexibility; while on the Syrian side the old view that the US had not done enough to assist the Arabs in resolving their grievances, and had been too gentle with Israel, was reaffirmed. Both sides felt that these factors to some extent contributed to the lack of progress; which of their policies were most significant in obstructing the peace process? And what role did Israel and other external factors play in the breakdown of talks?

Furthermore, to return to a key hypothesis in the introduction of the thesis, an analysis of the failures is necessary to gauge the extent to which ideology was an influential factor in Syria's negotiations. And if Syria was motivated, or restrained, by ideological principles, how far did such a position adversely affect the talks? History had shown that to mend relations with Israel automatically improved a state's relations with the US, and by default afforded it greater acceptance into the international 'community'. Egypt, and latterly Jordan and the Palestinian authority, had learnt this lesson. This, no small incentive for an isolated and economically struggling state, was at last a tangible reality for Syria after the Gulf crisis – was it something Syria was willing to jeopardise for the sake of ideology?

Many analysts have argued that finally, after years of inflexibility, Syria followed a realist model and was ready to forego its ideological principles in order to regain its territory, establish peace on its border and gain international prestige through greater ties with the US. Syria, it is argued from this position, was more willing than ever to sign peace with Israel and thus was at its most cooperative.

However, this of course serves to deflect responsibility for failed talks away from Syria, and points the torchlight on the US and Israel. Hence much of the analysis coming from the US and Israel retains the argument that Syria was indeed still motivated by ideology, and thus was intransigent and unrealistic in its demands.<sup>616</sup> Syria is portrayed by some American and Israeli accounts as not ready to move on, fearful of progress if a deal became unavoidable. Syria's historical attachment to ideology and domestic concerns about regime legitimacy are thus cited as having obstructed the talks.

Which of these accounts hold more accuracy? Indeed should the two positions of realism and ideology be separated in this way? The outcome of this analysis will have significant implications for the key arguments laid out at the start of this thesis, and will be crucial in an assessment of how ideology affects the foreign policy of a state, and Syria in particular. Six reasons for the failure of talks are analysed below.

### **6.5.1 Syria As Spoilers and the Arabs' Separate Paths to Peace**

Syrian intransigence is one of the oft-cited reasons for the failure of any talks Syria is involved in. Syria's singularity was especially striking given that by 1996, all the other Arabs parties who had been at war with Israel had opted for peace. Given that Syria was the only state refusing to sign, it seemed obvious to outsiders, and was indeed intimated by several key figures involved in the negotiation process, that Syria was the culprit behind the failed talks.<sup>617</sup>

And indeed the Oslo Accords, rather than being welcomed by the Syrians, came as a heavy blow to them. The Syrians expressed their disappointment by stating that they were 'neither opposed to nor supportive'<sup>618</sup> of the Oslo accords – diplomatic speak for dissatisfaction at an outcome. In reality, the Syrians were said to be 'furious'.<sup>619</sup> They were aware that the accord between the Palestinians and Israel effectively legitimised the normalisation of relations between Israel and the rest of the Arab world and as a result, as Shlaim noted, there appeared to be 'no longer a compelling reason for the Arab states to continue to reject

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<sup>616</sup> Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 211

<sup>617</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 449 felt Asad wanted the peace talks to work 'without any concessions on his part'; Christopher stated that Asad 'failed to rise to the challenge' of Israel's overtures of peace, see *Chances of a Lifetime*, 223; Albright, *Madame Secretary*, 481-2; Hinnebusch, Ehteshami, *Foreign Policies*, 155; Author's interview with Andrew Tabler, (Advisor Washington Institute for the Near East, Former media consultant for Syrian NGOs), Washington DC, May 2009

<sup>618</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 60

<sup>619</sup> Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 332

[Israel]’.<sup>620</sup> Worse still, for Syria, it appeared to vindicate Egypt’s much maligned policy in the 1970s of being the first among the Arab nationalists to recognise Israel. With the Palestinians, the one group in the region with most right to be aggrieved by Israel, seemingly following Egypt’s path, Syria was even further isolated than it had been after the talks in the 1970s. As Shlaim stated at the time, the result of this wider mood of acceptance of Israel was that ‘the rules of the game in the entire Middle East have radically changed’.<sup>621</sup>

From the US perspective, the Oslo Accords in fact increased the possibility of progress as it placed pressure on other parties to follow suit. Thus inability to cooperate or compromise put the Syrians in an especially unfavourable light when compared with their Palestinian counterparts for whom Syria had always claimed to speak up for. Syria’s unease about the breakthrough in the other tracks has been interpreted as resentment that others had achieved peace first, and an interest in continued conflict for ideological and domestic political reasons.<sup>622</sup>

However, Syria’s opposition to the Oslo Accords was not purely because it had scuppered Syria’s policy of obstruction as was suspected by the US, but because it undermined the hard won premise of the Madrid talks that the goal should be a comprehensive settlement.<sup>623</sup> It was this, not conflict with Israel at all costs, that motivated Syria. The Israeli-Palestinian deal immediately put Syria in a position similar to the one it had faced in the mid-70s when Egypt moved at a much faster pace, and its compromises undercut Syria’s bargaining power.

Moreover the notion that the Arabs would coordinate their strategies, to demonstrate to the US and Israel that divisive tactics to sell the Arabs short would not work, had been proven to be an empty promise. The eagerness of other Arab parties to strike deals for less than they had initially demanded conveyed the impression that those demands were merely rhetorical – this in turn gave Israel less reason to cooperate fully and deliver concessions. This had implications for all the Arab parties, not just the Palestinians.

While it was not publicly expressed at the time, Syria’s suspicions about Israel’s bilateral deal with the Palestinians, and the fear that the latter had been too eager to sign what was not an equitable deal for the Arabs, was justified over time when the details of the deal

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<sup>620</sup> Avi Shlaim The Oslo Accord: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 23:3 (Spring 1994), 24-40

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

<sup>622</sup> Hinnebusch, Ehteshami, *Syria and Iran*, .71

<sup>623</sup> Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 332



emerged.<sup>624</sup> It emerged that Israel still retained full control over at least 75 per cent of Palestinian territory; only 3 per cent of land was being returned to Palestinian control, and these were areas that Israel were not interested in keeping anyway.<sup>625</sup> The growing fear among many Palestinians was that they had not so much compromised as accepted defeat to the Israelis and Zionism. As Rhynold explains:

On the Palestinian side, the dominant narrative continued to view Zionism as a colonial movement. This meant that peace, rather than being associated with justice, was associated with capitulation or at best pragmatism.<sup>626</sup>

It was a fear shared by the Syrians, and thus their opposition to Oslo was also grounded in objective strategic concerns, not merely blind obstructionism. These factors helped to undermine the foundations that had initially persuaded Syria to join the Madrid talks in the first place; Rabinovich agrees that after Oslo, the ‘prospects for an Israeli-Syrian agreement diminished’.<sup>627</sup>

The notion that Syria was the more obstructionist party in negotiations is further countered by the number of Syrian concessions compared to Israel’s, and the fact that none of the numerous pauses in the peace process were attributable to Syria. Baker acknowledged that it was Asad's acceptance of the Bush-Baker initiative that induced Shamir to relent and agree to attend the Madrid Conference<sup>628</sup> whereas Shamir was acknowledged as ‘obstinate and unyielding’.<sup>629</sup> Brent Scowcroft was reported to have thought that any initiative would fail because ‘Israel was the main stumbling block to peace’.<sup>630</sup> Certainly in the early stages, the US relied on Asad – being the only one who mirrored the Israelis as a difficult negotiator – to make Israel rethink its strategy and avoid being blamed for scuppering the peace

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<sup>624</sup> See Mark Zeitoun, *Power and Water in the Middle East: The Hidden Politics of the Palestinian-Israeli Water Conflict* (IB Tauris, 2008); Christopher, 205 – this view was also shared by many in the Arab world in the months following the Oslo accords, which agreed self-rule for only two Palestinian cities, the Gaza strip and Jericho. Even so, some parts of the cities were to remain under Israeli control. The Palestinians would only have limited governing authority in the West Bank. The signs of the future breakdown of Oslo were apparent at the infamous map-signing ceremony in Cairo, 4 May 1994, when Arafat initially refused to sign the maps demarcating Palestinian lines in the two aforementioned cities. An interim agreement (known as Oslo II) was signed in October 1995, provided for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from nine cities in the West Bank, but its implementation was interrupted by Rabin’s assassination. In addition to territorial issues, the distribution of access to water and economic terms proved to be heavily weighted in Israel’s favour.

<sup>625</sup> Lesch, *Arab Israeli Conflict*, 336

<sup>626</sup> Jonathan Rhynold, ‘The Failure of the Oslo Process’, pp. 10-11, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* no.76, 2008

<sup>627</sup> Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 56

<sup>628</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 371

<sup>629</sup> Ibid.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid., 415

process.<sup>631</sup> Much of the perception of Syrian intransigence relates to its insistence on Israeli withdrawal to the pre-war boundaries of the Golan. It is true that on this point Syria was not willing to compromise, but withdrawal from all Arab lands occupied during the 1967 War was the one key condition Syria had maintained since that war. While Syria could not control the fate of the Palestinians, it could still hold firm on principles relating to its own territory. According to Aaron Miller, the former Deputy Special Middle East coordinator of the US State Department, it was not necessarily Syrian ‘intransigence’ on this demand that was the obstacle in negotiations; he stated that one of the problems with the Madrid negotiations was:

Our inability to understand what would be required to reach an agreement. When Asad said 100 per cent [withdrawal from the Golan] he didn’t mean 99 per cent. If he wanted 100 per cent, instead of talking him out of it, which is what we tried to do...we should accept [it] and change his view of the process.<sup>632</sup>

### 6.5.2 Delays

Peace talks do need time, but they also need momentum. Too many delays allowed other events to have an impact on proceedings, and allowed old suspicions to be aroused. Rabinovich notes that the delays came from the Syrian side. He states that during the three and a half years of negotiations, Asad acted as if ‘time was no constraint’ whereas ‘Rabin was insisting on a deal that would be completed in several years’. Rabinovich also writes that Muallem complained that Peres after Rabin was ‘too bold and swift’.<sup>633</sup>

The first comparison between Asad and Rabin is at odds with the account provided by numerous sources,<sup>634</sup> including his own (later) admission that Asad ‘too cared about swift negotiations’;<sup>635</sup> in contrast Rabin is reported to have been cautious and slow-moving. Overall there were three periods of delays and procrastination attributable to the Israelis between 1992 and 1995: In December of 1992 after Rabin expelled the Palestinians; September 1993 when Rabin wanted to be able to digest the deal with the Palestinians, and again in January 1994 after signing peace with Jordan. These factors prompted Sharaa to note: ‘it seems that the Israelis have not made up their mind firmly, and haven’t committed themselves to a comprehensive peace’.<sup>636</sup>

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<sup>631</sup> Ibid., 469

<sup>632</sup> Author’s interview, Dr. Aaron Miller – former Deputy Special Middle East Coordinator US State Dept. 1993-2000, Washington DC, June 2009

<sup>633</sup> Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace*, 9

<sup>634</sup> See Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 536; Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 75; Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 85;

<sup>635</sup> Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 73

<sup>636</sup> Cited in Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 75, interview with Sharaa, Damascus 1998

Although the Syrians too were capable of drawing out negotiations, in large part because of Asad's meticulous approach, on this occasion there was less need for delay on their part. Importantly there was little ambiguity about their stated goals (full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan), and as such they were far more eager to see the implementation of the first stage of talks sooner. Indeed in a meeting with Warren Christopher, Asad stated that he wanted the withdrawal to be completed within six months of the talks.<sup>637</sup>

With regards to Syria's response to Peres, the accounts from all sides corroborate the view that Peres preferred to move at a fast pace. Muallem explains:

[Peres] was in a hurry – he wanted to enter the elections with the Syrian-Israeli agreement in his hand. He wanted to “fly high and fast,” as he used to say. I used to tell the Israeli counterpart that it is important to fly but it is also important to know when and where to land...

Thus the apparent discrepancy between accounts of Asad's urgency on the one hand, and hesitancy on the other, can be explained by the chronology of events. It is unsurprising that he reacted differently to Israel's contrasting approaches under Rabin and Peres. According to Martha Kessler, CIA officer and the US liaison at the peace talks, one of the problems in the negotiations was that at this stage there was ‘a huge rush, because the Clinton and Israeli governments were coming to the end of their terms’.<sup>638</sup> Ultimately, Peres' urgency when he took over amounted to little since he did not wait for the peace process to take its course and called elections within three months. This did a great deal to halt the peace process that he had sought to speed up.

Apart from the deliberate suspension of talks, there were also unproductive phases of the talks that did much to delay proceedings and diminish the appetite for cooperation. In particular, the military level discussions (COS I and II) added to the delays, particularly COS I which was widely seen as a failure. The failure can be put down to four main reasons: firstly, the military leaders had no authority to make final decisions that had such weighty political implications - the exclusion of the political leaders was therefore ineffective and rendered the C.O.S talks futile. Secondly, according to both Muallem and Rabinovich, the heads of their respective negotiating teams, the Israeli side went into these talks ill prepared, with Barak having only four days to prepare for what was being described as the break-

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<sup>637</sup> Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 222

<sup>638</sup> Author's interview with Martha Kessler, Washington DC, May 2009

through meeting.<sup>639</sup> Rabinovich stated that this was because the meeting was ‘held almost spontaneously’,<sup>640</sup> (although why it should have been arranged in such a way when the request for the meeting had been initiated by the Americans on behalf of the Israelis remains unclear). Thirdly, it appeared that Barak had his sights set on a political career. Not only was he due to retire at the end of the month anyway, but his future aims were influencing his demands during negotiations as he tried to calculate how the talks would impact on his election campaign.<sup>641</sup> And fourthly, according to Dennis Ross, the premise of the talks were flawed because they had differing goals of what they sought to achieve – Israel only wanted to lay out agreed aims, while the Syrian side also wanted to establish agreed upon principles.<sup>642</sup> This divergence prevented movement forward with C.O.S I, which was postponed in order to re-engage the political delegations. COS II talks were then pushed to May 1995. The Syrian side perceived this as having been a deliberate delaying tactic from the Israelis since it was known all along that ‘officers on their own cannot reach a decision’.<sup>643</sup> It meant that almost a whole year had lapsed since the Israeli-Jordanian agreement before Syria and Israel’s leaders met again to resume talks.

As for the US, they also played a part in these delays. According to Cobban, in 1994 Clinton was determined not to stop at the Jordanian-Israeli treaty but was impatient to move forward on the Syrian front, implying a sense of urgency for Syria’s side of the talks.<sup>644</sup> Rabinovich also implies the US gave greater importance to the Syrian-Israeli track.<sup>645</sup> But while Clinton did pay a visit to Damascus immediately after the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, these assessments do not seem to tally with two points: firstly, Clinton willingly surrendered a lot of the initiative in setting the agenda and timetable for negotiations to the Israelis. He was new to the complexities of the peace process and in large part leant on the experience of Rabin. Secondly, the US facilitated numerous delays on the Syrian-Israeli track at Israel’s behest – when they did seek to hasten the process on Israel’s part they always acquiesced with Israel’s calls for postponement or suggested format of talks. Thus even if the US sensed the Syrian track should be given more attention, particularly under Rabin, and notably after the deal with Jordan in 1994, it did not put much pressure on Israel to comply.

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<sup>639</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 66

<sup>640</sup> Rabinovich, cited in Cobban, 66

<sup>641</sup> Muallem cited in Ibid.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid., interview with Sharaa, Damascus 1998

<sup>644</sup> Ibid., 64-65

<sup>645</sup> Rabinovich, *Brink of Peace*, 55

### 6.5.3 Ambiguity and Dispute over Terms of Agreement

The 'Aims and Principles' document drawn up in most part by the Americans during the shuttle diplomacy of May 1995, was riddled with ambiguities. Given that this document was essential in salvaging the talks after the deadlock of the COS I discussions, and was to be the main foundation for discussions on security arrangements, this embedded ambiguity would prove to be a major problem for the peace process and was bound to resurface as a stumbling block further along in the process. The 'aims' part of the document was designed to reduce the possibility of surprise attacks, border friction and the danger of large-scale invasion or war – this chiefly addressed the concerns of the Israelis. Meanwhile the 'principles' part of the document stipulated that security had to be guaranteed equally *for all parties* (not at the expense of another), that the security arrangements had to be mutual and reciprocal, and in respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity. This acknowledged some of Syria's main concerns.<sup>646</sup>

The first problem with the document arose with the 'principles' section – all of this was uncontroversial, except a caveat in principle two, which suggested that if equality in terms of security arrangements could not be achieved, then these would be addressed via *modifications* – in other words Syria could be expected to take on a greater share of the security requirements to satisfy Israel's concerns. This partly depended on where the final line of withdrawal would come to – something which was not yet agreed upon. Thus important parts of the document were predicated on ambiguities, creating further confusion.

Such ambiguity aided Israel's strategy – indeed this was characteristic of all Rabin's public communications with regards to the extent of Israeli withdrawal.<sup>647</sup> The Syrians had been consistently clear that they would accept nothing less than full withdrawal and were not interested in any further interim agreements; Israel's demands on the other hand were less clear-cut from the beginning, and sprawled into more long-term aims concerning security, economic openness and normalisation, all of which were harder to define and achieve in the short-term. Moreover Israel wavered on what it was prepared to sacrifice – initially full withdrawal seemed a possibility to Rabin, but as he was pressed to commit to this he became increasingly swayed by the opposition this would incur among the Israeli public and all parties – left and right – in Israel. Domestic politics was ever a constraint in Israel's

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<sup>646</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 68-69

<sup>647</sup> Ibid, 70; Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 536; such was the ambiguity that Rabin operated under, that even Peres was surprised to learn the extent of withdrawal that Rabin had initially agreed to, when being briefed by Clinton after Rabin's death – see Ibid, 553.

decisions, and it produced volatility and unpredictability in the Israeli leadership.<sup>648</sup> Thus the real extent of progress in negotiations was always in question.

Why then did Syria display comparative eagerness to move forward when there was this level of uncertainty in Israel's commitment? This can partly be explained by the success of Israel's strategy, which was designed to allay both public fears and the suspicions of its Syrian counterparts. Rabin avoided being so equivocal as to halt proceedings, and to then be blamed for the failure. Moreover, Syria saw the initial acceptance by Israel to proceed on the basis of resolution 242 as a key success, and opted for a strategy in which they would hold Israel to this starting point. Syria was therefore ready to call Israel's bluff, knowing the ambiguity would have to be exposed at some point and that Israel would be responsible.

A second problem with the document was related to the accuracy of assumptions that influenced the 'Aims' section of the document. This section alluded to Israel's concerns of possible attack, and it based its demands for normalisation on this. However, Syria felt these concerns were an exaggeration of the reality.<sup>649</sup> On two occasions while the talks were underway, Israel had engaged in major military operations, launching air and ground offensives on Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, without any state response by its Arab neighbours. Based on precedent, the greatest threat of surprise attacks, of war or invasion in the region, came not from Syria but in fact Israel. Muallem further highlighted Israel's superiority 'over any combination of Arab states', arguing:

They have nuclear bombs, the most advanced arms and technology. American arms and supplies and technology are completely open to them. Israel manufactures 60 per cent of its needs in military equipment and is the fifth [biggest] arms exporter in the world. Yet despite all this, they used to tell us they were afraid of Syria. We did not believe this, and we kept asking ourselves the motive behind this exaggeration.<sup>650</sup>

Syria also questioned Israel's attempts to change the basic parameters of an agreement, which seemed to be written into the Aims and Principles document via the caveat permitting *modifications* to security agreements. One such modification, the early-warning station on the Golan, was considered to be a clear infringement of sovereignty, 'as if they wanted to spy on us from our own territory – and this in a situation of peace, not a situation of war';

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<sup>648</sup> Benjamin Miller, 'The State-to-Nation Balance: A Key to Explaining Difficulties in Implementing Peace – The Israeli-Palestinian Case', in Ben-Porat (Ed.), *The Failure of the Middle East Peace Process*, 39-69

<sup>649</sup> Muallem *Fresh Light*, 86

<sup>650</sup> *Ibid.*

moreover Israel demanded that all the area reaching just south of Damascus should be demilitarised, which would have meant ‘you open the capital to them’.<sup>651</sup>

Rabinovich offered an alternative account, that the reason why talks stalled was not because of Israel’s alterations in the terms of agreement, but Syria’s failure to deliver on Israel’s security conditions. In his diaries Rabinovich quoted the following statement from Asad:

“Many issues that constituted the elements of peace were still pending. These issues include the elements of security and other elements, and all of them are basic. The security issues might make the regained land something that is not worthwhile, and also might discount dignity and rights”.<sup>652</sup>

Rabinovich interpreted this as an acknowledgment by Asad that Israel had fulfilled its side of the bargain (pertaining to land return) but Syria had not fulfilled its side pertaining to security issues. It is true that Israel’s demands had not been met, more of which will be discussed shortly. However, the notion that Israel had fulfilled its side of the bargain needs to be scrutinised here. Firstly, the one key demand from Syria was full withdrawal from the Golan. But the Israeli negotiating team spent much of its time trying to reframe its initial acceptance of this term, and trying to convince its public that *no* firm commitment had been made. Secondly, even if Israel had given a firm (conditional) commitment to withdraw, then this was negated by two key points: a) Israel still sought an early-warning system and sought to situate Israeli troops on the Golan; b) whatever commitment Rabin had given became irrelevant when Israel proposed that it would have to be put to a national referendum in Israel – the negative outcome of which was predictable.

What, then, of the security arrangements and issues surrounding normalisation referred to by Rabinovich, that were encapsulated in Israel’s ‘aims’ in the document, and which were indeed included in Syria’s own proposed terms at the start of the talks? Though the talks never reached this stage of the ‘four-legged’ agenda, its inclusion on it has been cited as evidence that Syria was willing to forego its ideological enmity with Israel in return for peace and land. But this is questionable since here too there was a dispute in the interpretation of this aim and the timing of its implementation.

Firstly, Israel expected an end to the economic boycott of Israeli goods and businesses, and an opening up of borders to Israeli investment and tourism. Israel sought comprehensive

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<sup>651</sup> Ibid., 86

<sup>652</sup> Rabinovich, *Brink of Peace*, 12 – quoting Asad comments to Arab delegation, 13 August 1997 in Haaretz

recognition in political, diplomatic, economic and cultural terms. Moreover Israel expected the change to be swift. Syria refused to accommodate these expectations on two counts: 1) the Syrian public would not abide such a change:

You can't oblige [the public] to buy Israeli goods or visit Israel if they are not convinced that Israel has changed from being an enemy to a neighbour...we cannot be obliged to make the peace warm.<sup>653</sup>

2) The timeframe was unrealistically fast, while complete openness would not be equitable for Syria's economy:

They wanted open borders, open markets for their goods and so on. This would have had an obvious effect on our economy. Our economic regulations are not against them; we do not open our markets to any country.<sup>654</sup>

For Israel's part, the demands seemed realistic based on historical precedence, perhaps justifiably so, for these were the same terms that Sadat had almost unquestioningly accepted almost twenty years earlier. For Syria, the same route was not an option – Sadat had sacrificed public opinion and Egypt's autonomy in doing so, two core principles of Arab nationalist ideology. It was not a sacrifice Syria was prepared to make, even in return for the Golan.<sup>655</sup> Any deal had to fulfil Syria's ideological criteria. Thus on all four aspects of the agenda for peace talks, there was discrepancy between Syria and Israel's expectations. Israel was not prepared to offer full withdrawal, and Syria was not prepared to offer full normalisation, and both states were driven by ideology – within both the regime and public opinion – in their policies.

#### **6.5.4 Leaks and Public Opinion**

As was outlined earlier, the leaks during negotiations on the Israeli side, and the subsequent inflaming of public opinion against the peace process had a significant impact on the outcome of the talks: Firstly the leaks undermined Syrian confidence in the Israeli negotiators, due to the probability that the leaks came from someone present at the talks, and also the inability of the leaders to crackdown on those leaks seemed to indicate a lack of seriousness on their part – to what extent did the public outcry in fact play into Israel's strategy? It was notable that in other high level negotiations, for example for the Oslo

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<sup>653</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 86

<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

<sup>655</sup> Hence Asad was taken aback by Peres' insistence that 'normalization' and economic cooperation was crucial - See Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 73



agreement, there had been no such leaks in the run-up to its announcement.<sup>656</sup> There was thus a suspicion that whenever Israel was not enthusiastic about the terms of a deal undergoing negotiation, leaks of information would help to sabotage the deal. Secondly, concern over public opinion was the main reason for Rabin's regular requests for postponement in order to allow the Israeli public to 'digest' the developments in other tracks of the negotiations. Thirdly, Peres' early elections call, which ultimately broke off the talks, came on the back of Labour's narrowing lead in the polls and increased support for the right-wing Likud, as well as a calculation of how the public would react to a potential Syrian-Israeli deal if it advanced before the elections.

Given the apparent ease with which Egypt and later Jordan and the Palestinians were able to agree deals with Israel regardless of the popular view, why was the Syrian-Israeli track so susceptible to public opinion? Firstly, while the Golan was a huge prize, particularly on a personal level for Asad under whose watch it was lost in the first place, Syria was not willing to cross public opinion in order to regain it. This was in part connected to the precariousness of a minority regime, and thus domestic politics played some part in this. But also, the public were opposed to regaining land if the deal was not equitable and at the expense of the country's dignity. Particularly because previous peace treaties between other Arab states and Israel had fallen so far short of Arab demands, peace had now become synonymous with accepting defeat to Israel in the eyes of the Arab public. Thus even if ideology had become an irrelevant factor in the eyes of the region's leaders, this was not the case among the public. When Baker was trying (and failed) to secure Syria's agreement to an early proposal for the format of talks, he asked in frustration what Syria 'had to lose' in agreeing. To this Asad gave the very telling reply:

We will lose Arab domestic public opinion...they will know what is going on. This would not only be adventurism, it would be a form of suicide. It is one thing to adopt a suicidal policy if it brings benefits to the people, but it is truly foolhardy if there is no positive result.<sup>657</sup>

This in many ways sums up the close connection between Syria's adherence to ideological principles, and the role of its public opinion. Asad was willing to be pragmatic, but pragmatic in his view was to stay close to public opinion in the Arab-Israeli conflict, because their ideology was also in Syria's best interests. And it was Syria's adherence to ideology and unwillingness to compromise both Syria's ideational and strategic interests, which then

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<sup>656</sup> Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 199

<sup>657</sup> Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 448-9

tested Israeli public opinion and ideology, in a way in which no other Arab parties' positions did during the Madrid talks.

Israel's intransigence was a winning formula against other Arab states who had discarded their own ideological policies. But with Syria holding firm to its demands for full withdrawal before any conditions could be delivered, Israel's leaders were forced to consider a level of compromise that had not been required of them previously. Israeli public opinion became so exercised on the Syrian-Israeli track precisely because there was less Arab compliance as there had been on the other tracks. Almost mirroring Syria's adherence to ideology, there was a strong current of ideological fervour running deep not just in Israeli politics but also society; and there were red lines which neither the left or right of the Israeli public divide were willing to sacrifice.<sup>658</sup> In the period of the COS II talks, a poll was conducted by Tel Aviv University's Tami Steinmetz centre – 46.5% of Israelis objected to any withdrawal from the Golan, another 34.8% wanted only a partial withdrawal.<sup>659</sup>

To deal with this opposition, Rabin had three elements to his approach to talks – ambiguity as mentioned above, secrecy and slow drawn-out talks.<sup>660</sup> The first two were designed to put the public off the track of what agreements were being made, while the latter was supposed to help the public get used to small aspects of the agreement gradually. Thus it was this fear of public opinion that contributed to the delays that did so much to undermine the process. While in Syria, the fear of alienating public opinion was tied to a dual fear of revolution and loss of ideological credibility, Israel's fear of losing public opinion was tied to a fear of losing power at the ballot box. As Muallem states:

Peres' decision to call early elections must have depended on pressures from within his own party, because the margin between Labor and Likud had started to narrow in the polls.<sup>661</sup>

Later Muallem stated:

Israel believed that you can push a button to make peace warm, to direct Syrian popular attitudes from a state of war to a state of peace. This is not logical, especially when it is rare to find a household in Syria that has not lost someone on the battlefield. It is always necessary to educate and inform the people.<sup>662</sup>

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<sup>658</sup> Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 39

<sup>659</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 80

<sup>660</sup> Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 199

<sup>661</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 82

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid.*, 86

However, the approach used in Israel was not gradual. Rather everything was done in secrecy, and finally when negotiations were at a more advanced stage, there were leaks being made to the public without giving the government a chance to prepare the ground; and when they did via Peres' statements, it was very sudden and too much for the public to digest. This evoked even more public emotion and hostility to talks.

### **6.5.5 Individuals versus Political System**

It would be easy to attribute certain periods of progress or deadlock to the personalities of the different leaders. While Shamir comes in for a lot of criticism in US reports, Rabin is portrayed as being very compliant; thus the peace process is widely seen to have progressed in large part because of Rabin. It is true that the leaders did have an impact on the direction of negotiations, but whether the impact was substantive or merely procedural is debatable. Firstly, the different leaders often had different priorities or views on how to proceed with negotiations – Shamir was unconducive to any peace settlement that would require compromise of any territory by Israel. In contrast Rabin indicated that he agreed with a land for peace approach (thus a substantive change) but favoured dealing with each track separately and one at a time. And even having decided this, he changed his view, switching from the Syria first policy which he started out with, to prioritising the Palestinian track.<sup>663</sup> Peres conversely favoured dealing with all the tracks simultaneously (but still bilaterally).<sup>664</sup> Arguably this was closer to the notion of a comprehensive peace settlement envisioned by the Syrians; but this was merely a procedural impact, not a substantive one. Moreover by this stage a number of the parties on the Arab side had already concluded deals with Israel and the incentive for joint bargaining and consultation was running thin on the ground.

But regardless of the leader, what ultimately made it almost impossible for Israel to be flexible was a) the government deemed itself to be so constrained by the weight of public opinion, and b) given this was the case, the high number of leaks from the Israeli government to the press meant that a number of opportunities for progress failed because of Israeli public opposition.<sup>665</sup> The leaks almost certainly were designed to have that effect.

Looking beyond the Madrid talks, many have agreed, including the Syrian leadership at the time, that the reason for the lack of peace talks between 1996 and 2000 was largely due to

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<sup>663</sup> Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 198.

<sup>664</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 6

<sup>665</sup> In April 1991 (Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 449),

the right-wing nature of the Likud party and its leader Netanyahu,<sup>666</sup> Muallem memorably stated that under Likud, 'it was a dialogue of the deaf'.<sup>667</sup> Certainly Likud's obstruction to negotiations is particularly apparent when compared with its predecessors, and its successor Ehud Barak's resumption of talks when he came to power in May 1999.<sup>668</sup>

Thus of course, individuals play an important role, particularly in a process that becomes, by its secretive nature, very personalised. But their overall impact needs to be weighed against the norms and the systemic factors that create consistent conditions and obstacles, limiting all the leaders' decision-making options in the first place. For example Cobban, writing in the early days of Barak's leadership, attributes too much causation to the agency of individual leaders. Netanyahu, she argues, derailed what she presents as an otherwise smooth and fairly successful process. She makes the argument that the peace process merely needed to be picked up from where it was left off under Peres and it had every chance of being successful. But it would be worth remembering that it was Peres who suspended talks after the two bus bombings in Israel (carried out by Palestinians); while it was Rabin before him who refused to move forward with Syrian talks after the Palestinian and Jordanian deals for fear of aggravating public criticism. The embedded ambiguity in the aims and principles of the talks was already creating problems under Rabin. And indeed even after Netanyahu, Barak continued some of the most controversial policies of his predecessor such as settlement construction, and often turned to populist policies, despite his initial rhetoric that had suggested otherwise.<sup>669</sup>

From this we can see that there are evidently some constant restraints on Israeli political decision-making especially in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which transcend the different leaders. The instability and uncertainty of Israel's political system, and the regular turnaround of leaders, makes it difficult for them to pursue the issue of peace consistently without resorting to populist tactics to curry favour with the Israeli electorate.<sup>670</sup> The assassination of Rabin was a potent warning to future Israeli leaders not to give anything away in a compromise with the Arabs.

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<sup>666</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 6; Christopher, *Chances of a Lifetime*, 226-227

<sup>667</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 84

<sup>668</sup> Cited in Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 5 – Seale and Barak interview, 23 June 1999, published by Al-Hayat.

<sup>669</sup> Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 365-376

<sup>670</sup> Rabinovich refers to the challenges of the political changes in *The Brink of Peace*, 5; also highlighted as a significant challenge in Author's interview with Kessler, May 2009.

Israel's political system ultimately influenced both substantive and procedural aspects of the negotiations. The temporaneous nature of the terms and strategies on the Israeli side generated uncertainty for the future of any settlement being negotiated, and also placed Israel's interlocutors in doubt as to how to proceed. And this then contributed to a lack of trust between the parties, an important component in any such negotiations. This lack of trust due to the internal uncertainty over Israel's government could be seen even during the peak period of negotiations.<sup>671</sup>

Of course Israel's democratic system cannot plausibly be seen as a reason behind the *failure* of the talks. Public debate, regular elections and political accountability, which were all demonstrated during the negotiations process in Israel in marked contrast to Syria, affect the politics of all open societies. However, it is worth pointing out that Israel is unique in the polarised nature of its politics in the realm of foreign policy. In almost all other examples of democratic systems, there exists a broad consensus across party lines when it comes to the major foreign policy decisions, precisely because policies in this area are more long-term, and more may be at stake, particularly if it involves issues of international war or peace. Time is needed to see through a policy and not render the efforts of each outgoing government futile. Where there are changes to a foreign policy, the changes are phased in over a long period of time. In most cases where negotiations seeking resolution to conflict are underway, they are continued by the incoming government. The outcome may still be greatly affected by changes in personnel (the Bush to Clinton transition is a good example of this), but the overriding policy goal tends to remain the same.<sup>672</sup>

Secondly, the potential swing in Israeli policy is greater due to the volatility of Knesset membership. Proportional representation, and the regular need for a coalition of many parties in order to form a government means the Israeli government is inherently weak in comparison with single-party governments in other democracies. As a result of the fluctuating personnel, and the possibility for what might be described as hard-line, even radical politicians, to ascend to power is higher than in most places. This, in addition to the ideological inflexibility of individual leaders and lack of political will, often renders the pursuit of a long-term and complex foreign policy change as futile; and when it is pursued, it

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<sup>671</sup> Author's interview with Martha Kessler, Washington DC, May 2009

<sup>672</sup> As seen with the transition from a Conservative to a Labour government during the Northern Ireland peace process in the UK.

lacks the momentum and continuity needed to make it viable. Such systemic factors on the Israeli side had a great impact on the talks.<sup>673</sup>

### 6.5.6 Conflict

In early 1996, Palestinian radicals opposed to the Oslo Accords carried out bomb attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets. Peres abruptly suspended his team's participation in talks, and unable to further act against the Palestinians he followed this up by a series of attacks against Lebanon known as 'Operation Grapes of Wrath'; shortly afterwards Peres was defeated in the general election.<sup>674</sup> The fall-out from the conflict led to a sharp deterioration in relations between not just Syria and Israel, but also Syria and the US. The first question to ask is: how did this combustion between Israel and the Palestinians, contribute to a breakdown in talks between Israel and Syria?

Cobban's explanation can be contested on two counts. Firstly, she argues that Peres suspended talks on the Syrian track because of pressure from his party to refocus on the Palestinian track.<sup>675</sup> The reasoning is highly improbable given that Israel suspended all talks, and its response was not to resume talks with the Palestinians but to take military action against the Palestinians and Lebanon. In reality Peres had just called an early election, and any deal with the Arabs would have faced major opposition from the Israeli public.<sup>676</sup> Secondly Cobban argues that Syria also terminated talks as it thought the attacks against Lebanon and the international conference against terrorism were aimed at the Syrians, and because there was 'no reassurance to the contrary' conveyed by Washington to Damascus.<sup>677</sup>

This is a typical self interest-based explanation. But there is no evidence to suggest that such assurances would have placated Syria's anger at Israel's use of force against its neighbours, nor is it evident that it was only concerns for Syria's own security that angered the Syrians. Israel's assault on Lebanon was not only construed as an indirect threat to Syria (although that is also true), but also demonstrated Israel's continued belligerence in the region in Syria's eyes. When assessing the history of Syria's reactions to such events, it is apparent that Israel's use of military action – even if not directly targeting and affecting

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<sup>673</sup> Shimson Bichler, 'Between Capitalism and Jewish Voters: Electoral Economics in Israel, 1977-1997': in J.W.Wright Jr, *Structural Flaws in the Middle East Peace Process* ( Palgrave 2002), 200-223

<sup>674</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 4

<sup>675</sup> Ibid.

<sup>676</sup> This is supported by Shlaim's account who gives greater weight to Israel's domestic considerations as a factor behind Peres' decision. See *The Iron Wall*, 557.

<sup>677</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 11

Syria – has always been enough to thwart Syrian engagement in any regional diplomacy.<sup>678</sup> Most accounts continue to seek motives of self-interest in Syria's refusal to condemn the attacks, or expel Hamas from its headquarters in Damascus. However, Lesch's explanation is more credible:

This is where Syria's traditional role at the vanguard of Arab nationalism and the rejectionist anti-Israel front and its oft-stated commitment to the Palestinian cause possibly hampered its ability to break out from this self-professed paradigm...<sup>679</sup>

Thus Syria's anger was *not only* an expression of its own state interests, as Cobban implies, but a reflection of Syria's continued adherence to ideological principles applied to the entire region. In turn it had a significant impact on its relations with the US, not least because the US was always seen to be too tepid in its condemnation of Israel's actions.

The second question to be asked is: given that the Palestinian attacks certainly contributed to the ending of talks, to what extent were they the most important factor in the breakdown of the Madrid talks after five years of trying?

Numerous accounts in academia, policy and the media world have cited the attacks of 1996 as the most significant factor that killed off the talks.<sup>680</sup> Thus the Arabs in general, the Palestinians in particular, and the Syrians by default, were to blame for the eventual failure of talks. If it had not been for this event, Peres would not have suspended the talks, Netanyahu would not have been voted into power, the US would have applied more pressure on Israel to compromise for a final settlement with Syria.

While the attacks undoubtedly had an immediate short-term and dramatic impact on the talks, it would be simplistic to cite them as the only cause. The usual balancing between short-term and long-term factors needs to be adopted, as in any historical assessment. In this case, it would be just as possible to point to what a number of scholars have argued were the inherent or structural flaws of the Oslo accords;<sup>681</sup> or indeed it would be possible to point to Israel's continued illegal construction of settlements; both of which could be seen as driving

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<sup>678</sup> See for example the disruption of the Disengagement talks in Chapter 5.

<sup>679</sup> Lesch, *Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 339

<sup>680</sup> Rabinovich argues the suicide bombings were the single most important factor in bringing Likud into power and ending the chances of peace: see *Waging Peace*, 74-5

<sup>681</sup> See: Jonathan Rhynold, "Realism, Liberalism and the Collapse of the Oslo Process: Inherently Flawed or Flawed Implementation?" in Guy Ben-Porat (Ed.), *The Failure of the Middle East Peace Process?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 128; J. W. Wright, *Structural Flaws in the Middle East Peace Process* (Palgrave, 2002)

factors behind the Palestinian attacks. Moreover, as I have sought to do in the above analysis, it is important to consider the ways in which the peace process on the Syrian-Israeli track had already been undermined and suffered a number of set-backs which exposed the fragility of the process and the wavering political will. Prior to the summoning of the Madrid conference Israel had been under no pressure since 1973 to enter negotiations with Syria and to withdraw from the Golan – certainly not militarily, nor domestically from its own public, and not diplomatically from the US either. It was not Israel who had called for a return to negotiations after the Gulf War; indeed on the Syrian-Israeli track it could be argued that Israel had the most to lose by cooperating. Given this was the case, the 1996 attacks which suspended the talks had in fact provided Israel with a reprieve, saving it from having to withdraw from the Golan and from defying its public opinion. Thus to see the flare-up of conflict between Israel and the Arabs as initiating the breakdown of the talks is a flawed analysis. Indeed Rabinovich concedes that the peace process was already receding by the time Rabin was assassinated.<sup>682</sup>

What the renewed conflict did do, however, was to produce an altered set of conditions that had a significant impact on future events and developments. Other actors, particularly Hamas, previously marginal to the theatre of the Madrid talks, now came to the fore. This pushed Syria closer to Hamas in its objectives, despite the difference between their respective secular and Islamist characters.

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<sup>682</sup> Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 70-1.



## 6.6 Conclusion

The above analysis allows us to assess the role of ideology in Syria's foreign policy more closely and how this affects its relations with the US. There are two arguments on opposite ends that need to be addressed. The first is that Syria remained driven by ideology and as a result was unchanging, intransigent, unwilling to make compromises and was therefore at fault for the lack of progress when the talks broke down. I have sought to demonstrate in the above analysis that this was not the case and that while there were red lines that Syria was not willing to cross even for the sake of a momentous peace agreement, it was not wholly inflexible where Israel showed it too was willing to compromise. It would certainly be inaccurate to describe Syria as being obstructionist simply because it held on to its core principles (of which there were relatively few). In many cases Syria attempted to facilitate further progress and speed in the negotiations.

A second argument contends that since Syria *was* open to striking a deal with Israel, it was in fact willing to abandon ideology for the sake of regaining its territory and establishing closer links with the US. Thus Syria's decisions are explained by materialist factors. Cobban states that Israel's conflict with Syria is 'a classic political-military conflict between two established states', unlike the Israeli-Palestinian case, which involves issues of national identity, national values and non-military solutions.<sup>683</sup> However, while the negotiations may have served to portray the dispute between the two states to be merely territorial, the hostility was in reality deeper than that. The enmity was and is visceral, rooted in history, memory, perceptions as well as material factors. Both sides wanted 'peace' of a sort, but there was no great interest on either side to seriously resolve the ideological clash.

Some have highlighted the fact that Syria was at least willing to contemplate normalisation of relations with Israel, something that had been unthinkable at any other stage of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But notably the 'peace' Syria was prepared to offer the Israelis in return was not spelt out. On this matter Sharaa stated: 'how can such a desirable objective logically be realized without eliminating occupation and restoring legitimate rights?'<sup>684</sup> It was for this reason that Syria was adamant to deal first and only with territorial issues, and showed little enthusiasm for the normalisation that Israel sought.

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<sup>683</sup> Cobban, *Peace Talks*, 12

<sup>684</sup> New York times, 1 November, 1991, A10: Cited in *Ibid*, 17

For Israel's part, it sought all the other trappings of peace to benefit its own security and economy, but could not countenance returning the Golan, not just because of strategic reasons but also an ideological belief that it rightly belonged to Israel. Indeed, if Syria's policy was not in large degree shaped by its ideology, it is likely there would have been greater cooperation, and sooner, on other issues such as security, distribution of resources, arms control, and economic integration, if it was aware that Israel would be more willing to withdraw from the Golan as a result. Egypt's example of a state discarding the constraints of ideology provides a comparable case of state behaviour when strategic self-interests trump ideological principles. However, for Syria, as long as the conditions upon which its ideology was founded were still in place, ideology continued to be relevant. Even before the talks broke down, Asad (referring to Israel, and possibly implicating the US as well) stated:

I believe that they want a dark future for us...I believe that the long-term goal of the others is to cancel what is called the Arabs, what is called Arabism...I mean cancelling our feelings as a nation, cancelling Arab feelings, cancelling pan-Arab identity. We, as Arabs, certainly reject this because...Arabism is not a commodity to trade in even though this is what others seek.<sup>685</sup>

The way in which external factors help to foster or alter the relevance of ideology can be seen from Syria's reactions to two separate trends in the 1990s. It could be argued that when its neighbours, and especially the Palestinians, reached a rapprochement with Israel, which coincided with a global systemic change and the onset of US unipolarity, Syria's ideological zeal was briefly dampened. It is evident that there was a degree of bandwagoning, with pressure felt by the Syrians to comply with US demands.

However, external factors also helped reinvigorate Syrian ideology, namely the renewed hostilities between Israel and those Palestinian radical groups that emerged stronger as a result of the peace process and the loss of the PLO's legitimacy. Instead of condemning the attacks or expelling the various Palestinian organisations from their bases in Damascus – among them Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestinians – Syria appeared to gain renewed purpose in its own ideological campaign against Israel. The alliance and support that had been lost with the Oslo accord and the formation of the Palestinian Authority, was replaced with a strong alliance with those groups that were now seen to be closer to the Arab nationalist, anti-Zionist spirit. Given the option between pursuing the realist-statist route that had been carved out by its Arab neighbours and upon

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<sup>685</sup> FBIS 12October 1995 pp50-61, 'Radio on Al-Assad Al Ahram interview', cited in Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 70

which Syria had unwittingly embarked itself, and the path of ideological 'resistance' that seemed to have been reignited with the breakdown of the Madrid process, Syria chose the latter.

This in turn had a concomitant impact on Syria's relations with the US. Syria had attempted to improve its relations with the US in response to the Bush administration's efforts to end its isolation. But under Clinton it became evident that, as Miller stated: 'the Road to Washington is through Israel - full stop.'<sup>686</sup> This was corroborated by Rabinovich who argued that the US felt 'Israeli-Syrian peace could be a prelude to an American-Syrian rapprochement'.<sup>687</sup> Thus with relations strained already as a result of America's continued support for Israel, and Syrian frustration at America's role as mediators, the forging of closer links between Syria and 'terrorist' organisations merely pushed Syria and the US further apart. Syria made a deliberate decision to regroup with other 'resistance' forces at a time when it had slowly built up stronger links with the US and could have easily opted for a more US-friendly strategy. Strategic and power-political considerations were at play, but the role of ideology in driving Syria's decisions at this time, in consistency with its long-term policy, cannot be discarded.

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<sup>686</sup> Author's interview with Miller, June 2009

<sup>687</sup> Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 50-51

## Conclusion

### Explaining US-Syrian Relations and the potential for change

This study has examined in detail the relations between Syria and the US, both the continuities and changes in their bilateral policies. It has brought together different periods in the history of US-Syrian relations to identify recurring patterns across time. The first two historical periods exemplified the confrontational nature of US-Syrian relations, which has been resilient even in the face of many changes within the region and realignment of Arab states with the US. The second two phases focused on the episodes of greater engagement between the two states, although those instances were ultimately short-lived. The thesis has sought to explain these trends.

#### Guiding Questions and overall arguments:

The overarching questions that I posed at the start of the thesis were the following: why has Syria persistently opposed the US, and to what extent has the US contributed to hostility between the two states? The first point to note is that the questions, to a degree, characterise US-Syrian relations as being linear and fixed, whereas in reality they have been far more complex than that. Nevertheless, the episodes of cooperation can be described as being less frequent than the periods of mistrust or outright hostility, which have been the more continuous features of US-Syrian relations. To help approach this question, a series of secondary questions were also posed.<sup>688</sup> These can now be answered based on the historical analysis carried out.

Much of the blame for US-Syrian tensions has been attributed to Syria acting as a 'spoiler' against American policy in the region. It is the case that during the Cold War Syria refused to accept US aid after independence, or to participate in US-led regional alliances such as the MEC, and instead struck an alliance with the Soviet Union. It was the most vocal in its criticism of the US, led the boycott of the US after 1967, and gave its backing to Iran after 1979. Therefore it might appear that Syria was opposed to the US at all costs. However, Syria had not always set out to disrupt US strategy in the region - Syria initially had a highly positive view of the US in the inter-war period because it was seen to be opposed to the European powers' exploitation of the Middle East. Syria also demonstrated its willingness to engage in negotiations with the potential of compromise. This was demonstrated after Hafez Asad came to power in 1970 with the acceptance of Resolutions 242 and 338, during the

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<sup>688</sup> See Chapter 1, pages: 12-14

Disengagement Talks after 1973, and particularly in the run-up to and during the Madrid peace process that followed.

In that Syria was one of the Arab parties that remained most consistent in its demands, it could indeed be seen as a spoiler for American strategy in the region. But whereas this has often been presented as wilful and irrational disruption, an alternative look at the situation provides a more rational explanation of Syria's position. Thus rather than view Syria as an obstructionist party with no constructive goals of its own, it is more accurate to see Syria as pursuing its own positive principles and goals for the region, which contradicted those of Israel's and thus set it on a collision course with the US as well.

What then were the American policies that contributed to US-Syrian hostility? Syria's animosity stemmed from three key American approaches: 1) a tendency to marginalise Syria in regional issues based on lasting Cold War perceptions of Syrian intransigence and expectations of blind opposition to the US; 2) clear preferential treatment of Israel, and protection of Israeli interests which directly undermined Syrian and Arab aspirations; and 3) an expectation that Arab parties would and should carry the burden of concessions in the Arab-Israeli dispute, and would eventually forget their grievances against American policy if enough financial, military and political incentives were provided.

In the early stages of the Cold War, US interventionism (exemplified in the Syrian-American crisis in 1957) was the biggest contributor to Syrian hostility, but after the 1967 war America's support for Israel became the overriding factor behind US-Syrian tensions. Massive increases in arms sales and financial aid to Israel under Kennedy and Johnson, and a shift in strategy under Nixon which twinned Israel to US security interests, demonstrated to the Arab parties that their goals were seen as secondary to those of Israel. Israeli intransigence during negotiations, though at times frustrating for the Americans, did not result in American diplomatic pressure or isolation as it did for the Arab parties. As for US expectations of the Arabs carrying the greater share of concessions, it meant that when Syria did not relent to American incentives (unlike Egypt), it was seen in a particularly negative light.

In relation to this last approach of the US, it is arguable that it overestimated the potential for Egypt to influence other states in the region. This led to heightened, and indeed unrealistic expectations that the Arab parties would comply in search of similar financial and political

incentives as those received by Egypt on the back of its truce with Israel in 1978. The US failed to take account of the histories of different Arab states, the strength of public opinion against any rapprochement with Israel, and also maintained an uncritical look at Sadat's decisions.

Herein lies some of the answers as to why Syria did not pursue the same path as Egypt, despite both sharing many similar traits in the past. The case of Egypt, its 'pragmatism' and apparent interests in peace, were often used by the US to castigate what in comparison appeared to be Syrian obstinacy. However, Egypt's pursuit of peace with Israel was by no means a success for peace in the region: the tactic of isolating non-compliant actors, such as Syria and the Palestinians only served to exacerbate the estrangement between them and the US, and their conflict with Israel; meanwhile Israel's boldness in taking unilateral measures and its military position in the region were strengthened, fostering deeper resentment against it; and conversely, though Egypt now had the ear of the US, its stature in the region was greatly undermined due to a loss of Arab nationalist credibility. In that sense, Syria's refusal to side with Egypt over its alliance with the US, and a refusal to accept the same financial and military incentives that had been offered to Egypt, was ideological but also reflected pragmatism in terms of public opinion and consequences for the region.

America's approach reflects its misdiagnosis of the region in general and of Syria in particular. The notion that military and economic capabilities, or geopolitical factors such as territorial size and resources, are the main motivating factors or the only determinants of influence and power in the region grossly underestimated the importance and power of ideas. This underestimation meant that Syria's role in the Arab-Israeli conflict and its ability to affect the politics of the region was often dismissed on the ground that it lacked many of the above capabilities and assets; and yet its *ideological* weight had not been taken into consideration sufficiently.

Syria's ability to act independently, despite lacking in economic, military or geopolitical power has been regularly overlooked. While it would be far-fetched to suggest that Syria does not need the backing of more powerful allies in the region, its willingness to act alone even when facing diplomatic isolation has been notable throughout the periods under study in this thesis. Thus reducing Syrian opposition towards the US and Israel to a product of a balance of power system, in which Syria was merely bandwagoning with Egypt and the Soviet Union in the past, or latterly with Iran, erroneously overlooks the ideational

component in Syria's foreign policy, which it has often pursued even when it resulted in a disagreement with its more powerful allies.

Overall, this thesis argues that a significant factor behind Syria's regular opposition towards the US lay in its attachment to ideological principles. Its opposition to US interventionism and support for Israel was not only borne out of a power-political strategy, but a political thought that prioritised Arab independence and freedom from external domination – it should be emphasised that this does not rule out 'realist' goals, many of which in Syria's case are coterminous with its ideational goals. The US contributed directly to Syria's mistrust by its interventionist policies, its overt bias towards Israel, and its marginalisation of Syria (and the Palestinians) in regional politics. The US often exacerbated the situation by failing to understand the roots of Syrian opposition and dismissing it as pro-Soviet bias, irrationality or xenophobia. The overall outcome of this was the increased salience of ideology for Syria as a framework for countering US hegemony and its support for Israel.

### **Methodological and theoretical frameworks**

While a historical approach has been at the heart of this study, the role of theory in organising the analysis and framing the vital questions should not be overlooked. One of the outcomes of the thesis is to highlight the constructive role theory can play in a historical analysis and in opening up the study of the Middle East to non-regionalists in the academic discipline. However, rather than provide all-encompassing explanations, theories in any study should merely act as a tool to: organise and structure one's arguments and findings in a more systematic way; to enable one to move beyond very specific, *sui generis* explanations in order to provide broader conclusions about a case-study; and to facilitate comparative studies with other cases from different historical and geographical contexts. Thus while the first goal of the thesis was to provide a thorough and comprehensive historical account of US-Syrian relations, a secondary but important goal in this thesis was to evaluate the accuracy of theoretical assumptions that have commonly underpinned other accounts.

The first two chapters highlighted the methodological difficulties associated with an ideational approach to FPA. One of the key problems was the assumption that ideological explanations of Middle East politics imply irrationality on the part of the leaders on the one hand, or assume instrumentalisation of ideology for the sake of manipulating the masses. Both positions lack nuance and fail to recognise the possibility that ideology and pragmatism could be compatible in a given foreign policy. Moreover the notion that ideological policies

can also serve and support both ‘realist’ interests such as state security, and a so-called ‘liberal’ motive of reflecting popular opinion, is also overlooked as though this is untenable. Therefore the thesis has argued for greater nuance in the study of ideas in Middle East politics, and the first important step towards this was to demonstrate how this could be operationalised in the US-Syrian case.

Four components to this were outlined. The first was the need for a typology of ideology which would allow one to identify whether something constituted an ideology or not, beyond the realm of ‘identity’ or ‘interests’. The seven point typology outlined normative and prescriptive values; agency; outward solidarism; internal pluralism; adaptability according to context; political goals; and societal cooption, as tenets that define ideologies, and which all apply to Syria’s Arab nationalist ideology.

The second step in the methodology was to define the political goals of Syria’s ideology. This was particularly important in order to filter out the generalisations that are prevalent in much of the literature. To aid this, Freedén’s conceptualisation of core and peripheral goals was applied, which enabled us to separate the ideology’s priorities from its unessential characteristics. Firstly, recognising the potential for peripheral goals to become core goals and vice versa, and for ideologies to affiliate or separate from others, was important in making the case for flexibility and evolution in ideologies over time. Secondly, it helped to demonstrate how ideological actors can be pragmatic by sacrificing peripheral goals while still adhering to their core goals. Thirdly the importance of understanding and defining an ideology according to its *practical* manifestation, beyond just its theoretical or intellectual face, was highlighted.

Given Syria’s Ba’thist history, the intellectual writings of Michel Aflaq and Salah ul-din Bitar were a key source for identifying Syria’s core ideological goals. These goals were: Arab independence and autonomy, freedom from external domination and opposition to colonialism; crucially, they gained relevance within a foreign policy, rather than domestic policy, context. These theoretical goals were also corroborated by a more popular socio-political movement in Syria, which manifested the core Arab nationalist sentiments in their political activism. Chapter 2 laid out a framework that illustrated the factors that produce an ideological foreign policy; chapter 3 then analysed the historical and practical emergence of ideological politics in Syria during the inter-war and post-independence phases. Thus both



the intellectual and practical expressions of Arab nationalism were analysed to distil the most important goals of the ideology.

### **Measuring Ideology in Syrian policy towards the US**

The third component of the methodology was to integrate key questions in the thesis which could then be used to measure when ideology was functioning in foreign policy. These questions<sup>689</sup> were designed to help demonstrate that Syria was willing to forego and sacrifice financial, military, or power-political advantages in order to adhere to its ideological principles. The findings from these questions are summarised below:

1. How did Syria respond to high levels of US pressure?

In the periods covered in chapter 3, 4 and 5, we saw that the US applied significant levels of diplomatic pressure on Syria to comply with its policies. For example, it withdrew its ambassador and imposed an arms embargo since 1967, terminated all trade and placed greater sanctions on Syria in 1979 and generally encouraged its allies in the region to isolate Syria; and yet Syria did not abandon its ideological principles.

2. How did Syria respond when it was faced with isolation by its neighbours?

When compared with other states, for example Jordan which at varying times faced similar threats and capitulated to US pressure, Syria persisted in its policies which opposed the US. Similarly, with regards to the loss of previous ideological allies, Syria was not put off from its position; in fact isolation pushed Syria closer towards other allies who would support it in its goals – this was evident in chapter 3 when Egypt under Nasser was increasingly distancing itself from the Palestinian cause, and particularly in chapter 4 and 5 when Egypt and Jordan pursued a pro-American course.

3. How did Syria respond when faced with financial incentives to comply with the US?

While Syria resisted the pressure from sanctions and use of the ‘stick’ by the US, it also demonstrated that it would not be swayed by America’s use of the ‘carrot’ either. Financial incentives were either put on the table in return for greater ties with the US (for example through the Point IV programme under Truman) or were known to be

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<sup>689</sup> See chapter 2, page 59

forthcoming based on the experiences of other states. Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf states all received US aid after showing willingness to facilitate US policy in the region – Egypt in particular received the greatest amount of aid and economic support after Israel as a reward for its change from an Arab nationalist stance to a pro-American one (see chapter 5). Almost all the participants in the coalition against Iraq in the Gulf War in 1991 also received aid in return for their support. Syria in contrast did not receive aid from the US on any occasion and was not persuaded to abandon its ideological goals, despite being in need of such investments.

#### 4. How did Syria react to apparent failures in its ideological goals?

When Syria faced the apparent failure in the outcome of some of its ideological goals, it did not necessarily lead to a decline in the continued salience of ideology. The following might be seen to indicate a lack of success in Syria's foreign policies: the growing military and political strength of Israel; Israel's victories in 1948 and 1967; Israel's non-compliance with UN resolutions; Israel's refusal to withdraw from Arab land and lack of concessions in negotiations; the worsening plight of the Palestinians; the break-up of the UAR; Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights; and the consolidation of US hegemony in the region. And yet this did not deter Syria from its Arab nationalist position. If ideology had been adopted as a route to regional power and geopolitical gains, these examples indicate that it should have been abandoned in light of its failure to deliver. However, this was not the case, and indeed Syria's ideological commitment often increased in response to defeat.

There certainly were examples when Syria was willing to cooperate with the US and offer concessions in the 'peace process', but most of these instances did not contradict Syria's ideological principles. However, the above method also enabled us to falsify the importance of ideology – chapter 6 provided an important case study of Syrian cooperation which arguably *did* compromise its ideological principles. It cooperated with the US against a fellow Arab state, Iraq – and even though Syria argued that this was to protect the sovereignty of Kuwait, it did not absolve the fact that it had aided an external power to intervene in the region. Secondly, for all its calls for a comprehensive peace, Syria appeared to give in to the separate peace strategy towards the end of the peace talks in the mid 1990s, in return for its own territory. It appeared to envisage the possibility of peace with Israel,

albeit uncomfortably. Hence Syria's ideological commitment highlighted above appeared to diminish at some stages in the 1990s.

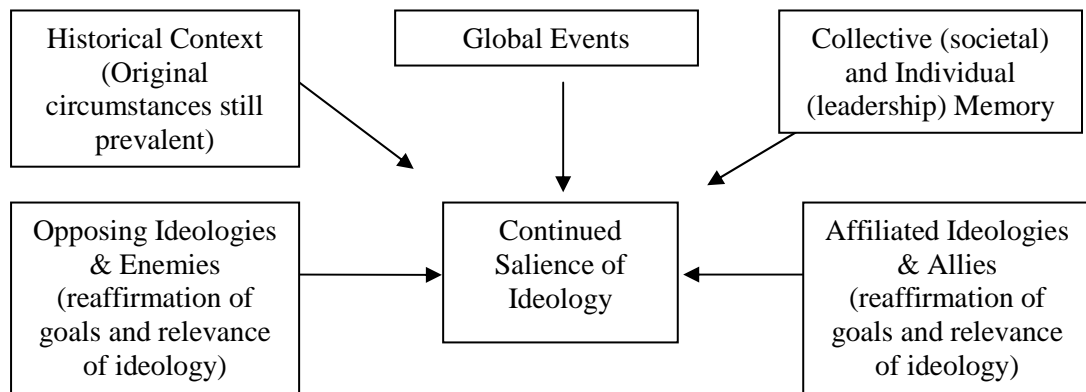
There were two possible ways of viewing this shift – one was to see it as a unilateral decision by Hafez Asad to discard ideology for a dramatic change of course, similar to the decision taken by Anwar Sadat. Such an assumption would be inaccurate given Asad's caution and pragmatism, and his own personal identification with Syria's ideology. Thus a better way to explain the above changes was to look to the wider context in which Asad's decisions were made.

### **Explaining ideological salience in Syrian foreign policy**

In order to explain all the above trends, we needed to understand the contexts in which ideology was deemed to be important, but also the conditions which diminished the salience of ideology for Syria's foreign policy. This was important to avoid a deterministic account of US-Syrian relations – one which characterises Syria's policy as somehow always being destined to reflect ideological principles. This certainly is not the case. If, therefore, Syria's adherence to ideology is contingent and changeable, what factors is it contingent on?

Two frameworks that guided this thesis on this question were FPA and constructivism. For a more complex understanding, we needed to unpack the state to identify the internal sources of state policy. However, this approach did not negate the traditional realist factors – these too were crucial for a comprehensive understanding. Thus external, geopolitical and global systemic factors were also taken into account when attempting to understand the salience of ideology from an FPA perspective. While FPA delineated which factors to analyse, constructivism enabled us to explain how those factors in turn contributed to the construction of ideas and norms over time. Each historical period covered in the thesis should not be viewed as separate blocs, but rather as progressive stages in a process of increasing mistrust between Syria and the US. If circumstances change to disturb that process, the role of ideology in Syria's policy towards the US need not be fixed and may dissipate. But if events continue to incrementally build on historical experiences that embedded the importance of ideology in the first place, ideological norms will remain. This framework allowed for the possibility that these norms, and thereby US-Syrian relations, might change – but first those conditions would need to change. This framework was mapped out in chapter 2 with the following diagram:

Fig. 1: The Contingency of Ideological Salience



Using this model as the fourth component of the methodology, we can summarise how each of these factors either perpetuated or reduced the importance of ideology for Syria's foreign policy towards the US, therefore demonstrating the *contingency* of Syria's policy towards the US.

(i) In terms of historical context, this was perpetuated, for Syria at least, throughout the periods under study in this thesis. As outlined in chapter 3, the importance of ideology in Syrian foreign policy emerged with the European mandate system, and was continued with the establishment of Israel and American interventionism. In chapter 4, this major source for Syrian ideology did not recede but in fact was exacerbated after the 1967 War, when the Sinai, the Golan Heights, the West Bank and the Gaza strip were all occupied. This salience of ideology for Syria was continued in the period studied in chapter 5: while Egypt was able to regain the Sinai after the Disengagement talks, the occupation of Syria's Golan Heights, and Palestinian territories, meant the 'struggle' against its enemies was still very much alive. Ideology was supposed to act as a guide and framework for making decisions in the face of such struggles, and as a result it remained highly relevant as long as Israel still held Arab territory.

(ii) Opposition: Syria did not operate its ideological policies in a vacuum, but it was mirrored by those that it opposed. Firstly, we saw in chapter 3 that the US was strongly influenced by its own ideological perspective in its policy towards the Middle East, and wrongly viewed Arab nationalists in the Cold War as being controlled by the Soviet Union, which therefore put them in the 'enemy camp'. Furthermore, Israel's own strong adherence to Zionist ideology, inherently incompatible with Arab nationalist ideology, directly put it at

odds with Syria. Like Syria, Israel's commitment to ideology was also shaped by its own historical narrative. Israel's ideological motivation was evident when it capitalised from the 1967 War to expand its borders, not just for security reasons, but also to encompass more of what it considered was 'Greater Israel'. This had implications for the negotiations in chapter 5, for while Israel was prepared to sacrifice the Sinai, which it had occupied as a strategic bargaining tool, it was not willing to sacrifice the Golan Heights which Israel's right-wing argued also held religious significance. Thus it was clear that Israel was often as inflexible, if not more, than Syria in sticking to what it believed were non-negotiable, ideological principles. For Syria, knowing that its staunch enemy was pursuing (and succeeding in) its ideological goals strengthened the relevance and perceived necessity of its own ideological principles.

However, while there appeared to be no potential for change among Israel's political establishment, there were signs that the US could have pursued alternative strategies that would have diluted some of Syria's ideological opposition against it. There was a regular tug of war over ideas and strategy between the State Department and the President's office. Under the Truman administration, the State Department stressed the importance of providing aid to Syria in order to build its infrastructure post-independence, under Eisenhower it discussed the need to understand Arab concerns beyond the Cold War context, and after the 1967 War it questioned the US' close relationship with Israel and argued for the resumption of economic and cultural ties with Syria. In all these cases the President's office overruled the State Department's recommendations. However, this divergence was reduced under Bush on when both sides were interested in rapprochement with Syria. Although it did not remove the salience of ideology altogether, it did a great deal to reduce the confrontational element in Syria's ideological policy towards the US.

(iii) The role of personalities and individual agency, and how it played off systemic factors was a crucial factor in sustaining the importance of ideology in Syria's foreign policy. It is unsurprising that most of the leaders after independence adopted an Arab nationalist position since all of them had lived under French colonial rule. The most significant leader to have had an impact on the continued salience of ideology in Syria's policy towards the US was Hafez Asad. Growing up under colonial rule instilled in him a strong Arab nationalist outlook; he also felt a personal enmity with Israel, having participated in every Arab-Israeli war and particularly after the loss of the Golan Heights when he was the minister of defence. As outlined in chapter 4, his experiences and ideological motives influenced the Ba'th, the

military, and Syria's policies as he rose in power. His interpretation of ideology had an impact by instigating changes (between the theorists and militarists in the party; or between the radical Jadid regime to Asad's pragmatism) as well continuities.

Of course those at the very top were not the only ones with the capacity to direct foreign policy, and Syria's military had an interesting and complex role to play despite it being an authoritarian system. Staunchly ideological and opposed to Israel, the military elements in the Syrian regime acted as a constant reminder to the leadership of Syria's Arab nationalist commitments. Chapter 3 outlined two occasions when Syria had leaders who took clear pro-American positions: General Husni Za'im in 1949 and Ma'mun Khuzbari in 1963. Both regimes were short-lived – Za'im, who also signed a truce with Israel, was assassinated a few months into power, while the Khuzbari regime was overthrown by the Ba'hist coup. The unpopularity of both regimes was shown to be directly related to their support for the US at the expense of Syria's ideological principles, and it was the army that took direct action against them.

And finally public opinion also needs to be considered as a factor in Syria's ideological policy. While the constraints placed on US policy by domestic opinion and lobby groups have received more attention in academic literature, the influence of Syrian public opinion on the regime's ideological position and policy towards the US has at times been dismissed as irrelevant. However, this thesis has sought to demonstrate the crucial connection between the Syrian state's position vis-à-vis the US and Israel, and the public mood. A powerful convergence of public and state animosity towards Israel and mistrust of the US has meant that whereas in other aspects of politics the regime has been able to bypass domestic opinion, there remains a rare normative adherence by Syria to popular demands on Arab nationalist concerns. Even when Syria had leaders who abandoned the ideological agenda, there was a continuity of Arab nationalist opinion among the general public and the military before, during, and after these brief periods of rule. It is in fact remarkable that there was so much continuity in Syrian foreign policy towards the US despite such a lack of domestic political cohesion prior to the presidency of Hafez Asad.

It is true that Syria's decisions were not *dictated* by public opinion – Asad's actions during the Gulf War in chapter 6 demonstrated he was willing to take risks; but only as far as it would also produce tangible benefits, not just materially but also in terms of Syria's ideational goals as well. When a deal with Israel appeared possible in 2000, the public in

support of the military's position reacted with hostility to the notion that any compromise would be offered to the principle of full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan – thus unsurprisingly, certain compromises that were reported to have been offered by the Syrians were categorically taken off the agenda when Asad met with Clinton in Geneva.<sup>690</sup> While Asad calculated his public's mood and continued adherence to ideological principles accurately, Anwar Sadat or later Yasser Arafat can be seen to have miscalculated in this area – their publics had not been prepared to abandon their ideological goals, and the leaders suffered the loss of legitimacy as a result. Thus all three components of societal factors played into Syria's continued adherence to ideology in foreign policy.

For the most part, the above conditions remained constant. However, in the following areas there were indeed significant changes to the original circumstances, which led Syria's foreign policy to become further removed from its ideological principles.

(iv) Global Events: Chapter 3 addressed how the onset of the Cold War affected events in the Middle East. However, while it was a new phenomenon on the international scene, it did not overturn the basic dynamics of Middle East politics but exacerbated them. Cold War rivalry saw superpower intervention and did drag the region into a global conflict, but it also enabled those states that chose not to align with the US to ally with the USSR to balance against American hegemony. This is what enabled the Arab states during the Cold War to retain so much agency: as long as the Soviet Union was willing to sell them arms and give their political backing, the Arab nationalists were not compelled to turn to the US for military support.

As a result, the greatest level of change in US-Syrian relations occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many at the time predicted that the demise of the USSR, the rise of the US as the sole superpower, and the apparent mood of reconciliation in the Middle East, would reduce the salience of ideology. With US power greatly enhanced, the propensity of weaker states seeking to align with the US and its allies seemingly increased. As outlined in chapter 6, the new context of unipolarity placed an implicit pressure on Syria to comply and take actions against a fellow Arab state. It did not do so on the basis of financial incentives, but Syria did seek political advantages and an end to isolation as a result. It is notable that the US left Jordan completely in the cold after the Gulf War as payback for its support of Iraq; in turn, Jordan had to go to even greater lengths to prove its loyalty to the US to restore its

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<sup>690</sup> Rabinovich, *Waging Peace*, 130-133

relations. In giving its support to the US when American power was at its zenith, Syria avoided such isolation or the embarrassment of having to show contrition afterwards. Similarly during the Madrid process, Syria did feel the extra pressure to cooperate with the US, more than it otherwise would have. These events on their own however would not have been enough to sway Syria away from its ideological position – for this we need to look to the last contingent factor.

(v) The role of regional actors: This condition had a varying impact on the salience of ideology for Syria. When it adopted Arab nationalist policies after independence, it shared ideological goals with a number of Arab actors. The Palestinians were at the forefront of Arab grievances against colonialism and the west, whereas Egypt joined with the Arab nationalist camp after the Free Officers' revolution in 1952. Iraq followed suit in 1963 though its relationship with Syria was fraught with power-political rivalry. Jordan showed willingness to join in the Arab nationalist cause when it suited it, but without offering much further commitment. Given that Arab nationalism claimed to defend the rights of all Arabs and the Middle East against external interference, some level of convergence of ideological goals across the region was important. The first blow that was dealt to Syria's Arab nationalist policies was Egypt's alignment with the US and its peace with Israel. However, as discussed in chapter 5, while it was a significant setback it did not diminish Syria's adherence to ideology.

What did eventually undermine the relevance of ideology in Syria's strategy was yet another defection from the Arab nationalist cause and the fight against Zionism. But this time the defectors were the Palestinians. This struck at the core principles of Arab nationalist ideology, which was deeply attached to the Palestinian cause. It is true that at the regional level, Syria was as capable as other Arab states in working against the Palestinians (as was seen by its actions in Lebanon). However, in relation to the US and Israel, Syria had for decades spoken out not only against its own occupation but also that of the Palestinians; for years Syria had argued for Palestinian representation in the peace process. Thus when Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo agreement, it not only was seen as a grave betrayal by Syria, it also appeared to remove the need for a comprehensive settlement.

This demonstrates that the conditions that make ideology relevant can change, and this indeed forced Syria to reassess its goals. Hence we see that after Oslo in 1993, Syria was far more ready to consider a separate deal with Israel, and went much further in negotiations



than it had on previous occasions. Some commentators have highlighted this development as an example of Syria's abandonment of ideology and pursuit of realist self-interest at the expense of its Arab neighbours. Certainly 'realist' politics were at play here, but it should also be noted that throughout the process until the Oslo Accord in 1993, Syria consistently called for a comprehensive settlement, coordination of Arab efforts, and Israel's withdrawal not just from Syrian territory, but all Arab territory. But by the end, it was the Syrians who were left behind by their Arab partners before they too then searched for a separate deal with Israel.<sup>691</sup> Thus the strength of ideology waned, not because the principles were no longer pertinent, but because the feasibility of realising those goals had diminished so dramatically after the loss of key allies, particularly the Palestinians, and the changing global situation in which the US were the only power through which any mediation could occur.

And yet, just as the salience of ideology could be undermined with the loss of fellow Arab nationalist actors, it could also be revived with the emergence of new allies. Hence, as outlined in chapter 6, Syria returned to a more ideologically inclined policy towards the US after the increased activism of Hamas in the mid-1990s. By giving sanctuary to Hamas leaders and by giving its strong support to Hizbullah in Lebanon, Syria knew well that it would incur the anger of the US and rekindle much of the hostility that had existed in the past. And yet the appeal of a renewed ideological momentum in the region, with the emergence of new allies, had a significant influence on Syria's foreign policy.

What the above summary suggests is that the tensions between Syria and the US and Syria's adherence to Arab nationalism are contingent on a number of factors. The conditions that have facilitated the continuities in US-Syrian relations have become embedded over time, but there is also evidence from the historical analysis that there is the *potential* for change. What, therefore, are the conditions needed for such a change? Firstly, for an underlying, structural change to take place in US-Syrian relations, two significant factors would need to be altered. The first is the historical context and the role of opposing ideologies. Should external interference and perceived exploitation of the region end, and Israel's occupation of Arab land be overturned, the primary conditions for Syrian hostility towards Israel and in turn the US might dissipate. This would not necessarily mean there would be an abandonment of Syria's ideology, but that the conditions within which it gains the most relevance would have changed dramatically.

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<sup>691</sup> Muallem, *Fresh Light*, 89; Author's interview with Imad Moustapha, Syrian Ambassador to the US, Washington DC, June 2009; Author's interview with Flynt Leverett -former CIA Senior Analyst during the Clinton Administration, Washington DC, June 2009.

The second type of change that might occur is if all the above conditions remained the same with the exception of the position of the US. Thus if the US no longer gave its support to Israel, and challenged Israeli policy, there would very likely be an improvement in US-Syrian relations.

And finally, the third type of change to US-Syrian relations would see the historical context and opposing ideologies remaining the same, but the Syrian sentiment that this needs to be challenged would diminish. Thus if there were to be a major shift in public opinion, in the values held by the Syrian leadership, and in the ideologies of Syria's allies (such as Iran or Hamas), all of which no longer sought to resist Israel and to challenge US hegemony, there would most likely be an improvement in US-Syrian relations. The short-term likelihood of all three scenarios is highly contestable, but they remain the possible avenues for change in US-Syrian relations.

### **Future research and final conclusions**

This thesis did not look so far ahead; the historical analysis stops at the death of Hafez Asad in 2000. However, there is ample potential for this study to be continued and extended to analyse US-Syrian relations under Bashar Asad's regime. Some of the corner-stones of US-Syrian relations remained the same since 2000, such as America's strong support for Israel; however there were also new components to US-Syrian hostility, such as America's 'War on Terror' after 9/11, its invasion of Iraq in 2003, and Syria's withdrawal from, but continued involvement in, Lebanon. While 9/11 was a global event that briefly produced an opportunity for improved US-Syrian relations, similar to the post-Cold War period, it soon faded with the emergence of the Bush doctrine and the Iraq War. These events, along with the second Intifada in 2000, served to strengthen the role of Arab nationalism in Syria's foreign policy, and sparked a new phase of US-Syrian hostility that was arguably worse than some of the periods studied in this thesis.

Conversely, some of the factors that ensured ideology remained salient under Hafez Asad may have receded, thereby potentially reducing the strength of the Arab nationalist component in Syrian foreign policy – for example, Hafez Asad's personal enmity towards Israel and adherence to Arab nationalism to a great extent stemmed from his own personal experiences having fought in the Arab-Israeli wars. Such historical experiences cannot weigh on Bashar Asad exactly as they did on his father. How does this impact on the

salience of ideology in his foreign policy? A comparative study to identify the similarities and continuities, and differences and departures, between father and son, would be the logical next step after this thesis. Thus it is hoped that this study has provided solid foundations for future research on US-Syrian relations, which is increasingly recognised as a pivotal dynamic in Middle East politics, and has also provided a thematic anchor (this being ideology) which would facilitate a more focused comparison between the two regimes.

Furthermore, this thesis has highlighted the way in which the dominance of realism in the IR of the Middle East has distorted the analyses of foreign policies by preventing a more serious engagement with genuine ideological factors in the region. In order to redress this, ideologies *do* need to be taken more seriously, in tandem with constructivism which highlights the contingency of those ideologies. And in order to do so the false dichotomy between ideology on one hand, and pragmatism or rationalism on the other, needs to be dismantled, for it rests on numerous theoretical assumptions that are not borne out empirically. Thus the aim of the thesis has been to provide a practical framework for analysing the role of ideologies in the foreign policies of Middle East actors more effectively, giving recognition to the importance of ideas in politics and understanding it in a more nuanced and complex way. It is hoped that this challenge can also be taken up on the back of this study. The framework outlined need not only be applied to Syria and its future governments, but could be used to analyse other ideological actors in the region – not just Arab nationalists, but also those aspiring to Zionist or Islamist political principles for example. Indeed a key outcome of this thesis has been an emphasis on identifying ideological agency and not immediately seeking to shoehorn it with other political explanations when it might not fit, simply because ideologies seem to lack a natural theoretical home in IR.

Finally, with regards to adopting a more nuanced approach to studying ideology, this thesis has argued that Syrian Arab nationalism needs to be understood and measured within a foreign policy context, for this was the context in which it was formulated in the first place. The problem with trying to assess Arab nationalism's relevance by analysing Syria's domestic policies, is that the ideology is not particularly concerned with the domestic sphere beyond the issue of foreign intervention. With regards to Syria's foreign policy and global conflicts, the ideology still has much credence; but in relation to the domestic situation it is rendered less relevant. However, it is not only scholars who need to pay heed to this distinction – political leaders are also guilty of conflating the differences. The uprisings in

the Middle East reflect the regimes' disconnect with the people on serious *domestic* issues; thus the (ab)use of Arab nationalist ideology, largely irrelevant for the domestic context, to quell dissent at home is an ineffective and largely futile strategy. While Marxist arguments depict the masses as being easily duped by the elites, this thesis has argued that even in Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes, public opinion carries agency and influence, and is far more astute than scholars have given it credit for – therefore governments who dismiss it or seek to crush it do so at their peril. The current situation in the Middle East corroborates this argument. In the context of Syria, it is plausible for the people to support a regime's foreign policy that pursues ideological principles, but to oppose the same regime that suppresses the people at home, as numerous opponents have argued. If governments can make a distinction between foreign and domestic policy, so too can the public. Thus *context* is a crucial consideration when seeking to understand the role of ideology.

Thus several lines of academic enquiry have been delineated above, demonstrating the wide scope for a critical and original research agenda that can be forged via this study. It is hoped that the findings will have constructive implications for research in other areas of Middle East politics, but also more generally for theoretical debates in the discipline.

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**Entry A1 5630:**

2546329 / MLR Number A1 5630 / RG 59/ [Lot #76D451] E 11 - Water Resources - Syria 1972

2546327 / MLR Number A1 5630 / RG 59/ [Lot #76D451] DEF 12-5 - Armaments-Use, Procurement & Sale - Syria 1973

2546344 / MLR Number A1 5630 / RG 59/ [Lot #76D451] STR - Strategic Trade Control - Syria 1973

2546334 / MLR Number A1 5630 / RG 59/ [Lot #76D451] POL Rel - Syria/Other Arab States - Syria 1973

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