

**SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ISRAEL**

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This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Science.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ISRAEL**

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In this thesis, Syrian foreign policy towards Israel between 1946 and March 2011 is analyzed. In this context the main aim of the thesis is to find out an answer to the question of how the domestic, regional and international factors play role in shaping in Syrian foreign policy towards Israel. Accordingly, the study consists of three parts. In the first part of the study, a historical background of Syrian foreign policy of Israel is provided since the late Ottoman legacy until the establishment of the Arab Republic of Syria in 1946. In the second part, the period between 1946 and 1970 is examined. In the third part of the study, Syrian foreign policy towards Israel in the 2000's is scrutinized. Finally the main arguments of the thesis are put forth, and the developments in Syrian-Israeli relations from the perspective of Syrian foreign policy after the March 2011 uprising are covered.

Key words: Syrian Foreign Policy, Israel, Domestic, Regional and International Determinants of Foreign Policy.

## ÖZ

### SURİYE’NİN İSRAİL’E YÖNELİK DIŞ POLİTİKASI

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Bu tezde Suriye’nin 1946 ve Mart 2011 arası dönem İsrail’e yönelik dış politikası analiz edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda tezin ana hedefi iç, bölgesel ve uluslararası faktörlerin Suriye’nin İsrail’e yönelik dış politikasını şekillendirmede nasıl bir rol oynadığı sorusuna cevap bulmaktır. Buna göre çalışma üç bölümden oluşmaktadır. Çalışmanın ilk bölümünde Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun son döneminden, 1946’da Suriye Arap Cumhuriyeti’nin kurulmasına kadar geçen süre Suriye’nin İsrail’e yönelik dış politikasının tarihsel arkaplanı olarak sunulacaktır. İkinci bölümde 1946 ve 1970 arası dönem incelenecektir. Çalışmanın üçüncü bölümü 2000’li yıllarda Suriye’nin İsrail’e yönelik dış politikasını ele alacaktır. Son olarak tezin ana argümanları ortaya konacak ve Suriye dış politikası perspektifinden, Mart 2011’de Suriye’de çıkan halk ayaklanması sonrası Suriye-İsrail ilişkilerindeki gelişmelere yer verilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye Dış Politikası, İsrail, Dış Politikanın İç, Bölgesel ve Uluslararası Unsurları.

*To my grandmother Rabia*

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The main aim of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Syrian Foreign Policy towards Israel in three periods: 1946-1970, 1970-2000, and 2000-2011. The thesis has tried to analyze the main determinants, points of continuities and changes in these 3 periods by looking at three interacting and inter-linked levels; domestic, regional and international. In this sense, the thesis has sought to figure out how the three environments provided the framework in shaping Syrian Foreign Policy towards Israel by posing certain kind of opportunities and challenges to the Syrian regime. To this end, the general foreign policy characteristics of Syrian of foreign policy are set forth through a historical perspective starting from the pre-independence era.

Also the place of Israel in Syrian foreign policy configuration, namely whether Israel has a constant and core place or it is merely an important aspect in Syrian foreign policy such as any other country is examined. It will be argued that Israel has a core, indeed mutually reinforcing place in Syrian foreign policy. That is to say Syria's policy towards Israel is the main pillar of its overall domestic, as well as foreign policy structure. It will be argued that despite the changes and challenges in the domestic, regional and international environments according to which Syrian relations with its neighbors changed, its behavior towards Israel has not undergone a major change since the last 40 years, as explained in Chapter 4 and 5. - Also this thesis concluded that Israel has a constant and core, indeed a mutually reinforcing place in Syrian foreign policy configuration. That is to say despite the historic Syrian animosity towards Israel, which used to be played out to the extent of refusing the existence of the Zionist state, ironically Israel's subsistence has been the main pillar of its overall domestic, as well as foreign policy structure. First and foremost, this was an outcome of Syria's founding state ideology being anti-Zionism, as explained in Chapter 1. Following the

establishment of Syrian state, first Arab-Israeli war made route-changing effect on the Syrian politics, as the first coup was waged as an outcome of the war. The war, along with shattering the newly independent state's effort for state building, gave way to the formation of radical political parties, i.e. the Ba'th. In 1967 occupied territory dimension as a constitutive element in Syria's course of state consolidation. Moreover Syria's efforts starting from the Disengagement Agreement in 1973 until now to be integrated to the international mainstream that would have repercussions on its internal political and economic situation was extremely tied to the settlement of Israeli-Syrian conflict. The enduring deadlock in the conflict is the major obstacle in Syria's eyes for its acceptance by the international community, as Syria sees the sanctions which weigh on itself as a result of its ongoing struggle with Israel, namely to retrieve its right to the Golan- the perspective that leads Syria reject the contention that it somehow has to "prove" itself a worthy partner in order to resume the peace talks.

The thesis also tries to discuss the place of retaking the Golan Heights, Syrian territory under Israeli occupation since 1967, which is tended to be known as the cornerstone of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel in the 2000's. Some argue that in case of Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, peace will be restored between Syria and Israel, while others argue that the occupation of the Golan renders Syrian regime secure from domestic attacks, therefore the regime has never sincerely negotiated peace with the aim of returning the Golan Heights. So the thesis tries to find out to what extent the return of the Golan Heights has been the main denominator of Syrian dealings with Israel.

The foreign policy of the Middle East states is generally tended to be analyzed by three mainstream approaches, each having certain shortcomings. The first is the structuralist theories giving priority to the systemic level constraints including realism's belief that the states' behaviors comply with the rules of the international system that is dictated by the great powers, and the dependency school's view that economic dependency turns Third World leaders into clients of the core. Syria's opposition to the Iraq War in 2003 at an international context that

the world's sole superpower, emerging from the terrorist attacks, compelled the country to make a choice and Syria's incomppliance with the Bush Administration's demands despite the economic sanctions even after losing the oil rich Iraqi trade partner run counter to the assumptions of the structuralists.

The alternative second approach is the leader-dominant model which supposes that facing few institutional constraints at home, leaders are able to translate their idiosyncratic personal values, styles—and pathologies—into foreign policy, which ignores; the domestic, regional and international contexts within which foreign policy is formulated and implemented, and the regime survival concerns of the leader that cause him to conceal his own preferences that run counter to dominant attitudes, public mood and political realities.<sup>1</sup> The inconvenience of this approach is illustrated by the huge gap existed between the actual Syrian foreign policy behavior- inaction before the Israeli attacks, and the radical rhetoric in the first decade of the Ba'thist rule.

Third is constructivism that puts forward another internal variable, identity, and insists cultural and ideational factors determine the state behavior as well as the structure of the international system that the state operates in. Thus sub- and supra-state identities compete with state identity, inspire trans-state movements, and constrain purely state-centric behavior.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the constructivist claim, for instance Hafez Asad sided with Iran, a non-Arab power in its war against the Ba'thist regime in Iraq.

There is a newer concept, Steven David's concept of "omnibalancing" – which suggests that policy-makers balance between internal and external pressures, in a decision context shaped by the main location of threats and opportunities, is said to be a good concept to be examine the Middle Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Bahgat Korany, Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Change*, (Westview Press, 1991), pp.8-9

<sup>2</sup> Shibley Telhami, Michael N. Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, (Cornell University Press, 2002)

states' foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> However this concept does not explain Syria's "defying a more threatening external power in order to get the legitimacy to neutralize less threatening internal opposition" by opposing the Iraq War in 2003 in Hinnebusch and Quilliam's terms.<sup>4</sup>

Acknowledging the effects of external structures, popular identities, leadership characteristics, as well as the balancing act between internal and external threats, this thesis will adopt a multi-causal perspective to explain Syrian foreign policymaking, since depending on a single theory covers only some aspects of the foreign policy determinants of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) states.

Hinnebusch argues that it is useful to assume that the foreign policies of Middle East states are shaped by the way their leaders negotiate the often conflicting pressures emanating from three conceptually distinct environments which are needed to be managed, or responded to, simultaneously: the domestic level; the regional systemic level; and the international level.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Nonneman stresses that in order to understand foreign policies of MENA states, foreign policy determinants must be examined on three interacting and interlinked environments as domestic, regional and international rather than relying on a single theory. In addition Nonneman indicates that foreign policies of MENA states are rooted in an eclectic 'complex model of international politics', and explanations in Foreign Policy Analysis, he argues, must be multi-level and multi-causal, as well as contextual.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gerd Nonneman, *Analysing Middle East Foreign Policies: The Relationship with Europe*, (Routledge, 2005), p.13

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, Neil Quilliam, "Contrary Siblings: Syria, Jordan and the Iraq War", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Volume 19, Number 3, September 2006, p. 525

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, (Boulder, Colo. : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002) , p.12

<sup>6</sup> Gerd Nonneman , op. cit., p.2

Within this framework the thesis will explain Syrian foreign policy towards Israel in three periods with respect to the developments at the domestic, regional and international environments.

With regard to the domestic environment between 1946 and 1970, Syria was in many respects a state without nation and a political entity without a political community. Therefore the priority of Syria's post independence leaders was to integrate Syrians into a unified society in order to form a national political community. Until 1954, the relations between Syria and Israel fluctuated between pragmatism and power plays, due to the frequent changes of administrations. Initially the popular hatred against the Jewish state, an imperialist-created colonial settler state unjustly implanted in the heart of the Arab world in Syrian's eyes, was the sole determinants of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel, as illustrated by 1948 War. However the pragmatic policies of Husni Za'im and Adip Shishkali, believing in ensuring the Western will and solution of the conflict with Israel was the only way for Syria's state building caused shifts in the policy towards Israel. Shishkali's ouster in February 1954 and the shift of internal political balance to the left, brought by an aggressive and assertive policy towards Israel, which commemorated in rise of the Ba'th with its Arab nationalist, anti-imperialist and anti-Israeli ideology to power in 1963. In 1966 assumption of power by the radical wing of the Ba'th, besides basing Syria's policy towards Israel on purely radical ideology, turned Syria into a minority regime which adopted the most extreme anti-Israel policy since the beginning of the conflict. The Muslim Brothers rebellion in May 1967 was an important domestic determinant as the Ba'th regime opted to warmonger against Israel, having the narrowest socio-political base as one way to cover its domestic instability, contributing in the outbreak of Six Days War in 1967, which resulted in the loss of the Golan Heights. The defeat led the fault lines within the Ba'th to come to surface and Hafez Asad, representing the realist faction assumed the power by 1970, favoring pragmatism as against radicalism and ideologically motivated policies towards Israel.

The regional level was equally determinative in Syrian foreign policy conduct towards Israel between 1946 and 1970. The threat perceived by Syria from the Arab world, namely the competition between the Hashemite dynasty (Faisal's Iraq with the aim of Fertile Crescent and Abdullah's Jordan with the aim of Greater Syria) and their Arab rivals (Egypt and Saudi Arabia) was a considerable reason in Syria's entry to the first war against Israel. Syria's lack of strategic depth under threat from both Israel and the Arab powers, led Syrian foreign policy to swing between adhering to rival regional blocs, which in turn affected the course of policy towards Israel. Until 1954, the relatively close relations with Iraq and Jordan helped to keep the policy towards Israel to follow an accommodative line. However by 1954 Syria preferred to ally with Nasser's Egypt and formalized the alliance with a defense pact in 1955, which played role in escalating the border skirmishes with Israel. The Suez War in 1956 further antagonized Syria's policy towards Israel, as Syria took its ally Egypt's side. Syria's exit from the Egyptian axis in 1961 following the end of United Arab Republic, and its efforts to realign Egypt was a factor at force in Syria's provoking the war in 1967. By launching a hopeless heroic war, Syria aimed at obliging Egypt to come to its aid so that the bilateral Egyptian-Israeli feud would be resolved. The defense agreement between Syria and Egypt in November 1966 paved the way for the Six Days War.

The international context for Syrian foreign policy was provided by the Cold War tensions, which until 1954 led Syria to pursue a fluctuating policy between the US and the USSR. Until 1954, the will of Syrian leaders, i.e. Husni Za'im and Adip Shishakli to secure the US aid for their domestic projects were the most powerful reasons behind the peace offers and negotiations with Israel. As Syria's left-oriented governments started to extend their influence beginning in 1954, the arms deal with the USSR opened the door to the full flood of Soviet and Eastern European arms, trade, credits, exchange visits of all sorts and bilateral agreements. It is worth to mention that rather than the alliance with the international power affecting Syria's policy towards Israel, it was Syria that used the alliance with the USSR to have a generous loan to finance the building of a

major army for their struggle against Israel. As Syria sought to manipulate the inter-bloc conflict for its own interests, the Cold War only affected Syria's policy in a way to give a free hand in pursuing its already radical policies – shaped by domestic and regional factors, towards Israel. In this regard the 1967 defeat became a turning point, as it heralded an expansion of the American presence that went hand in hand with a decline in Soviet influence in the Middle East, but contrarily rising Syria's reliance and dependence on Soviet support to get back the Golan.

Between 1970 and 2000, the domestic factors that could have played role were the deterioration in economic situation and the Muslim Brotherhood insurrection concurrently twice. However Hafez Asad had no record of taking foreign policy decisions for domestic reasons which would not otherwise have been taken on strategic grounds, as he succeeded to complete the state consolidation and turned Syria into a huge national-security apparatus in which the power was concentrated in his own hands. Besides, Asad successfully sold the idea to the public that he could apply any tool to struggle with the gravest threat to the country- Israel, since the country faced defeats and occupation due to the weakness and recklessness of a factionalized regime. Several times he acted against the Arab nationalist notions of Syrian people and displayed them as moves in the service of pan-Arab struggle against Israel, such as fighting against the Palestinians in Lebanon in 1976, supporting Iran against Iraq during their war between 1980 and 1988, and entry to the first Gulf War against Iraq. Eventually Syrian public opinion perceived the measures adopted by the regime as unavoidable under the prevailing regional and international circumstances. In turn, the domestic legitimacy of Asad's regime was largely built on its relative success in doing this.

At the regional level the most determinative factor was Egypt's peace initiatives following the 1973 War. As Egypt and Israel signed their first disengagement of forces agreement in 1974, Asad made a tactical shift in his strategy to diplomacy, also aiming at exploiting the leverage that Syria gained

with the Yom Kippur War. Asad publicly offered peace deals to Israel in 1975, 1976 and 1977, directed towards Egypt and the US to formulate a joint Egyptian-Syrian diplomacy with American backing. Adversely Egypt and Syria signed the Sinai II in September 1975, which removed Egypt from the military equation, diminishing pressure on Israel to deal with Syria. Thus Asad started to invest for alternative strategies that rested on Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinians in order to enhance his regional posture to give Syria extra cards in the diplomatic maneuvering of the late 1970s. However Egypt's signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979 brought an end to Syria's diplomatic policy. At this juncture Asad welcomed the change that Iranian Revolution made in regional power balance as a natural counterweight at a time when Egypt was lost to an Israel. Besides, Asad designed the alliance with Iran in a way to provide the support of Lebanon's Shites in the duel with Israel in Lebanon. Asad faced regional isolation due to its policies in Lebanon, as well as the close relations with Iran, warring against Iraq. As the war terminated, Iraq forced Syria into more isolation, and attempted to challenge Syria's regional position. In addition the Intifada in 1987 and rising posture of the PLO created difficulty for Asad, thinking that Arafat would go to a separate deal with Israel which in the absence of the Soviet patron, Asad could not obstruct. The balance of power in favor of Israel led Asad to adopt cautious policies towards Israel, as exemplified with its passivity during both Israeli invasions in Lebanon, and finally Syria sought to come to terms with the challenges presented to it, and started to send signals to Israel to participate in the coming regional peace framework. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait presented the opportunity for Syria to get integrated to the regional mainstream. During the Madrid peace process that Syria participated, the regional determinants of its policy towards Israel at the negotiation table was the separate deals of Palestinians and Jordan with Israel, giving the latter a considerable tactical advantage over undermined Asad's peace strategy. Thereafter Asad downgraded his insistence for comprehensive peace to the Lebanese track and for the first time signaled Israel his readiness to discuss normalization.



At the international level, the rising American influence in the region at the expense of the Soviets led Syria to adhere to diplomatic option, if not fully but as a crucial part in his strategy, marking a turning point in Syria's policy towards Israel. More specifically American-Israeli alliance which manifested itself in the course of the Yom Kippur War, as well as in its afterwards through the step-by-step strategy of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger compelled Asad to seek inclusion into the American peace agenda. However Kissinger's relative ignorance of Syria, and the subsequent transition from Carter to Reagan administration in 1982, reviving the Cold War thinking that saw Syria as little more than a Soviet proxy, caused Asad to replace the diplomatic option with strategic parity by the help of Soviet help. However Asad's resort to exploiting the Cold War, did not last long as the USSR lost interest in aiding Syria after 1985. The end of the Cold War and the Gulf War in its wake signaled the US as the sole great power with an aim to reshape the politics of the Middle East as demonstrated by the Madrid Peace Framework. Asad understood that he could not realize his goals in opposition to the remaining superpower and Syria's struggle with Israel had to take a chiefly diplomatic form and that required détente with the United States, which alone had leverage over Israel. As a result Asad made a strategic decision of making a contractual peace with Israel. During the negotiations between 1991 and 2000, in Syria's eyes the US did not prove to be an effective mediator, unable to put enough pressure to Israel to convince it to come to terms with Syria. The setbacks in the American mediator's position influenced Syrian foreign policy towards Israel in a way to preserve the other cards, first and foremost the alliance with Iran, and the proxy war, and refrain from moving into a breakthrough.

In the 2000's with regard to the domestic environment, the threat of domestic opposition to the survival of the regime- firstly because of the lack of democratic credentials of the regime mostly from the Islamic circles, and later because of the possibility of spillover of the sectarian conflict in the post-war Iraq, as exemplified by the Kurdish riots of 2003 and the rise of Islamic militancy, affected the course of Syria's foreign policy especially during the first years of

Bashar Asad's presidency. Bashar suffered lack of legitimacy because he was not a product of the state, namely his arrival at power was not by his own manipulation of the power within the regime but by the will of his father, in a country in which all previous leaders have come to power by coups of one sort or another.<sup>7</sup> Therefore until Bashar Asad consolidated his power to the extent that he achieved a relative autonomy in making foreign policy, he emphasized on the Israeli threat, hence adopted a stance towards Israel, in order to guarantee his regime's survival. This kind of threat surfaced in Bashar Asad's 11<sup>th</sup> year on power, before which he reapplied the policy of using foreign policy as a tool of survival at home, as he laid the blame for the riots on an Israeli plot incited by the imperialists and their collaborators in the Arab world.

With regard to the regional context, Bashar Asad inherited the idea that the Middle East is Syria's geopolitical battleground in which the struggle is to enhance Syria's strategic position vis a vis Israel- not only the occupier on the Golan Heights, but also the key geopolitical rival of Syria. In this regard main regional developments that affected Syrian foreign policy behavior towards Israel in the 2000's were: Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon that ignited renewed Hezbollah activity in the Sheba farms, and the Second Intifada that caused Syria to adopt a radical line, as mentioned above; several attacks from Israel on different Syrian locations starting from 2001 to 2007, which caused Bashar Asad to overharden his attitude towards Israel on the rhetorical level with a resolute inaction in practice. Iraq War in 2003 was the major development that opened the way for Syria's almost complete isolation, which reached a nadir with the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. Bashar Asad called back his father's double game – the simultaneous usage of military and diplomacy, and made relentless peace offers following the downfall of the Saddam regime, while continuing the proxy war in Lebanon via Hezbollah and the alliance with Iran, in order to enable Syria to negotiate from position of strength. Diversifying the regional alliances

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<sup>7</sup> Ziadeh Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East, (I.B. Tauris, 2011), p.48

was another strategy that Bashar Asad inherited, such as the alliance with Turkey, in order to have many cards at the same time on the table. The Second Lebanon War was the watershed regional development that Syria made use of to ensure a come back to the mainstream regional politics. During and after the war, Syria felt the balance of power with Israel was restored, therefore felt confident enough to raise the tension along the border. The Israeli attack to Syrian nuclear facility in the Southern part of the country in September 2007, restored the power balance, however the effect of the 2006 Lebanon War led Israel to take Syria more seriously as its regional posture was enhanced, which paved the way to the Turkish-mediated peace talks in mid-2008. Another regional development in 2008 that led Syria to augment its regional position vis a vis Israel was the political crisis in Lebanon, which was calmed down by Syria's facilitation, and resulted in formalizing Hezbollah power, thus restoring Syria's role in Lebanon. The Gaza War in 2009 resulted in the halt of the indirect talks between Syria and Israel and contributed in Syria's to uncompromising stance regarding the resumption of the talks throughout 2009 and 2010. Final regional development has been the Arab uprisings that spread over Syria forcing Bashar Asad to recall the domestic and foreign policy linkage as mentioned above.

At the international environment, the most significant determinant that shaped Syrian foreign policy was the Bush Administration's negative terms with Syria. Emerging from the terrorist attacks, the US was more determined to strike at its enemies, along with demanding Syria to change its course and join efforts with the international community to fight terrorism. In Syria's perspective, the Bush Administration's demands- to withdraw from Lebanon, ending the alliance with Iran, ceasing support to Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, would remove all the bargaining cards against Israel. Hence, as Syria refused to comply with the demands, found itself extremely isolated by the international community, even by the EU which Syria was negotiating to be part of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership with, since Bashar Asad assumed power. Facing absolute isolation from the West, on the one hand Syria clinged into the Iran-led alliance as the only remaining card against Israel, and pushed its support to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In

addition as it was revealed by the September 2007 Israeli attack, Syria went as far as build a nuclear reactor in order to achieve –strategic parity- with Israel with the North Korean help. On the other hand there was the desperate peace overtures to Israel, demanding American mediation, in order to win the heart and mind of the US. Obama administration's assumption of power at the beginning of 2009 removed the international pressure on Syria to a considerable extent, and led the Syrian foreign policy to be conducted in a more autonomous way, as illustrated by the decline in the regime's will to resume the peace talks on a satisfying basis for Syria.

In this thesis, Syrian foreign policy towards Israel will be analyzed in three periods. Following the introduction, in the second chapter a background will be provided covering the legacy of the late Ottoman period, the war-time period and Faisal's Arab regime in Damascus and the French mandate period. The main features of the modern Syrian state, and the characteristics of its foreign policy in general, as well as its foreign policy towards Israel in particular took its roots from the pre-independence era. The complex set of determinants of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel; the roots of both the most contentious issues of conflict and the peace talks between Syria and Israel emerged in this era.

In the third chapter, I will analyze the period between 1946 and 1970, during which Israel was set onto its essential place Syrian foreign policy configuration, as the wars and dialogues with Israel were deeply embedded in Syria's state formation. In this period while pre-Bath governments were too weak to contemplate either war or peace with Israel, the Ba'thist radicals were driven by a dangerous ideology of confronting Israel irrespective of the unfavorable balance of power. The peace offers of Syrian Presidents Husni Za'im and Adip Shishakli were the early manifestations of the emergence of pragmatism as the most salient feature. Even at the highest points of tension that Syria itself provoked either by its rhetoric or military offenses, when it faced reaction from Israel, chose to keep silent and slow down its radical stance. Also the emergence of minority rule with

the Bath settled the trend of overemphasis on the external threat in order to provide regime survival in this period.

The fourth chapter will examine the period 1970-2000. Hafez Asad introduced a policy with the still ambitious but more realistic goals to Syrian foreign policy towards Israel. He placed Syrian foreign policy towards Israel on a stable pragmatic line, his rhetoric notwithstanding, through combining “strategic adaptability” in the objectives with “tactical flexibility” in the ways to reach them. His ability to mix a variety of foreign policy instruments- limited war, proxy war, negotiations, alliance formation, obstruction – enabled Syrian foreign policy to exploit the opportunities posed by three environments, as well as demonstrating a remarkable talent for repositioning Syria more favorably within the political matrix when three levels posed challenges.

In the fifth chapter Syrian foreign policy towards Israel between 2000 and March 2011 will be scrutinized. As a leader from the new generation who was politically socialized in a different way than the previous leaders of Syria, Bashar Asad, taking the advantage of inheriting a strong state surrounded by favorable regional and international contexts, initially sought to bring changes to Syrian foreign policy towards Israel in line with his general Western-oriented foreign policy vision. With no exception Syrian foreign policy towards Israel in the 2000s has been shaped by Bashar Asad’s endeavor to respond to the challenges and opportunities coming from these three environments, which led him to follow his father’s footsteps, rather than introducing any change.

The main arguments of the thesis will be explained in the conclusion chapter.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PRE-INDEPENDENCE LEGACY**

Generally the modern Syria is tended to be seen as the outcome of the agreements made before, during and after the First World War, which represents Syria as a product of only exogenous developments, somewhat ignoring the historical constitutive processes.

As for Syrian foreign policy towards Israel, there seems to be two conflicting belief: on the one hand it is generally supposed that its foundations trace back to the first salient state-level interaction between the two: 1948 war, which in turn created a perception that Syrian approach towards Israel has always and only been conflictual. On the other hand for Arab-Israeli conflict in general, including Palestinian- Israeli one it is assumed that it was driven forward by primordial antagonisms, dating back to centuries old religious and ethnic aggression.

Contrary to these assumptions this thesis argues that the war-time agreements, even the following mandate rule which gave first essential features of statehood and deeply shaped the state in all the terms, yielded their impacts on the future course of the Syrian republic, its domestic and foreign policy alike, upon an already existing political culture which had been gained through the Ottoman rule, particularly in the period from 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It also argues that the make-up of Syrian state contains both external and domestic factors. Thus Syrian foreign policy is made on a balance between the interaction of both developments.

Regarding the Syrian foreign policy towards the Jewish state, the thesis argues that the 1948 war is not the beginning, rather a culmination of Syria's self-construction process in which its stance towards the Jewish state is also embedded. Another derivative argument is that, keeping in mind that in fact been

less than a century that Arabs and Jews became enemy, conflict is not the sole determinant of Syrian policy towards Israel. Therefore the roots of the Syrian perception and policy towards the Yishuv and later on the Jewish state will be analyzed. In addition the thesis argues that Israel has a core and exceptional place in Syrian foreign policy.

Assuming that the roots of Syrian foreign policy in general and towards Israel in particular lay in the pre-independence period, this thesis starts with a historical groundwork of Syrian Arab Republic. The historical legacy will be handled in three transformative sub-periods in a way to cover the constitutive external, as well as the internal factors that transferred Syria from being merely a geographic location into a nation-state: the late Ottoman rule (Mid-1800s-1914), the First World War and Faisal's Arab Kingdom (1914-1920), and the mandate rule (1920-1946).

Since the beginning of the Ottoman rule in 1516, the term Syria lacked any political connotation. It was merely a geographical designation, then known as '*Bilad al Sham*' and also referred as *Greater Syria*, for the territory that includes in addition to contemporary Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and the Turkish province of Hatay.<sup>8</sup>

The Ottoman legacy for the Syrian Arab Republic developed around the most salient feature of the Bilad al Sham population: sectarian differences. The territory hosted the three monotheisms as well as their offshoots, Sunni-Muslims, who were always favored by the Ottoman rulers, forming the majority.<sup>9</sup> From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, due to decentralization efforts of the Empire, the Sunni

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Leverett F. Lawrence, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, (The Brookings Institution, 2005), p.2.

notables came to act as local intermediaries of the region to supplement the power derived from Istanbul.<sup>10</sup>

The proclamation of Bilad al Sham as a state (eyalet) under the name of Syria in 1865<sup>11</sup> became the watershed for many developments that affected the future course of the Syrian Arab Republic. Besides being the first step of Syria's transformation from a geographic entity to a political one, promulgation as a state became the turning point in increasing the influence of urban Sunni notables as they were appointed to the local governorships. Through this process "politics of notables", namely the system that the Sunni elites pursued alignments with higher external actors in order to protect their domestic vested interests was formed.<sup>12</sup> This system persisted during the mandate period among the second generations of the notables who were the would-be politicians of Syrian Republic<sup>13</sup>, thus eventually Syrian notables' pragmatic behaviors became one of the most significant aspects of Syrian political culture and domestic determinants of Syrian foreign policymaking.

The socio-economic and political domination of the Sunni notable families continued until the Alawites managed to break it via the army throughout the mandate and post-independence periods and began to assume the political power. It is broadly assumed that the Alawite ascendance was due to the divide and rule policy of the mandate period. However the background of the ascendance of the Alawites, who were the poorest rural segment of the Syrian society,<sup>14</sup> is rooted in

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<sup>10</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism: The Politics of Damascus, 1860-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 10-11

<sup>11</sup> Fruma Zachs, *Making of a Syrian Identity: Intellectuals and Merchants in Nineteenth Century Beirut*, (Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), pp. 92-96

<sup>12</sup> Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (London: St. Anthony's College, Oxford, 1994)

<sup>13</sup> Keith D. Watenpaugh, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 35, Issue 02, May 2003, pp. 257-286

<sup>14</sup> Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria, Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p. 7-8



their centuries-old hatred against the Sunni domination and discrimination during the Ottoman rule. That is the most significant Ottoman legacy, the Sunni rule, was overthrown by its counter-force, the Alawite's compensation of their centuries long suppression, namely by another Ottoman legacy. However this did not bring an end to the pragmatism in Syrian policy making, which was a derivation of politics of Sunni notables.

Another related legacy of the politics of notables can be portrayed as the prevailing of the person-based rule i.e. structured around the charismatic leader in Syrian politics as against institutionalization, and leadership as one of the important determinants of foreign policy.

The second type of legacy of the late Ottoman rule, parallel to the decentralization efforts, was derived from the Ottomans' tolerance towards the European penetration into the Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. European powers approached Syria on a sect-based policy. Both Christian and Jewish minority groups accepted the protection of European countries and particularly Christians became the forerunners of the Western social and economic penetration into the Arab lands.<sup>15</sup>

Europeans further exacerbated the cleavages between the Muslims and non-Muslim minorities. Therefore the relations of the non-Sunni minorities with the European powers, together with Sunni preponderance fed competition and created historical cross-sectarian hostilities among the communities in Syria. This combined with the establishment of minority rule paved the way for another foreign policy determinant: regime survival concern of the ruling minority.

Another legacy owing to European penetration was the economic peripherization of the Ottoman economy into the world capitalist system as a "dependent state".<sup>16</sup> In this thesis although economy will not be considered as a

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<sup>15</sup> Zachs, op. cit. pp.2-3

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, op. cit. p.14

prior foreign policy determinant resting on the fact that politics prevails economics in Syria, as will be illustrated in the coming chapters, especially until the Ba'th ascendancy, there were times that Syrian leaders took decisions considering the economic benefits of some certain foreign policy acts. During the Ba'th rule as well, economic factors became part of minor considerations. That is to say Ba'thi rule has no record of taking foreign policy decisions for economic reasons which would not otherwise have been taken on strategic grounds. Nevertheless dependency as a legacy of the late Ottoman era is important to perceive the ground that Syria was established as a weak state with no viable economic resources, thus with no foreign policy asset.

Final legacy of the European penetration was that the advent of a new socio-economic environment in the Middle East via Syria prepared the ground for proto-Arab nationalism or Arab cultural awakening which later made Syria the center of Arab nationalist movement in early 20th century.<sup>17</sup> This left Syria the legacy of one of the main foreign policy characteristics: regarding itself as the beating heart of Arab nationalism. However Arab nationalist ideology would be subordinated to pragmatism, namely used as a pragmatic tool soon after it was introduced to Syrian politics, as will be illustrated in the coming chapters as the main foreign policy tool used in its dealings with Israel.

The pragmatism obtained from the politics of notables, dependency originated from European penetration and usage of ideology combined, prepared the ground for Syrian foreign policy to swing between different external alignments justified by ideological tendencies in the 1946-1963 period.

The afore-mentioned factors also determined Syria's policy towards Israel. During the early independence years Syrian presidents differed in their approach towards Israel, peace offers on the one hand, conflictual acts and rhetoric on the other. However for a deeper understanding of roots of the Syrian perception and

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<sup>17</sup> Nuri Salık, *Syrian Foreign Policy from Independence To The Baath Party's Accession to Power: 1946-1963*, Msc. Thesis, METU, Ankara, Turkey, p.26

policy towards the Yishuv and later on the Jewish state, it is important to look at the Sunni notables' outlook of the Syrian Jews, as they would be the effective politicians during the Mandate rule and the first years of independent Syria.

According to Zenner tensions and struggles between the Jews and Christians, namely the two *dhimmis* (non-Muslim subjects) living under the Ottoman Empire according to the *millet* system<sup>18</sup>, had existed from time immemorial for both religious and historic reasons, however there were no significant accord of inconsistency between the Muslim community and the Jews. It was because the Muslim majority in Syria were the unquestioned dominant segment of the society, thus did not have problem with the minorities, including the Jews. Zenner adds that the conflict between the Christians and the Jews were indeed exacerbated by competition in order to get the backing and support of the Muslim majority for being successful in the economic, administrative and public spheres.<sup>19</sup> Harel notes that the Muslims had hatred of, and hostility toward, local Christians, and had relative sympathy toward the Jews.<sup>20</sup>

There are two breaking points that paved the way for the Muslim majority of Syria to start to change their mind about the Jews. The first one was the increased European penetration that contributed to rising non-Muslim expectations of equal rights and a breakdown of the traditional dhimma structure.<sup>21</sup> Tanzimat reforms which replaced the existing millet system with equal citizenship of all the religious communities. Harel notes that the Muslims were insulted by the idea of equality with Jews and Christians. He goes too far, even describing the Muslim public as “fanatically antidhimmi”. The Sunni opted

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<sup>18</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, “The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State”, Journal of Contemporary History, Volume 14, Issue 3, p.694

<sup>19</sup> Walter P. Zenner, *A International Community: The Jews from Aleppo, Syria*, (Wayne State University Press, 2000) p.28

<sup>20</sup> Yaron Harel, “What are the origins of Muslim anti-Semitism?”, Ha’aretz, Apr.14, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/2.209/what-are-the-origins-of-muslim-anti-semitism-1.274106>

<sup>21</sup> Zenner, op. cit. p. 28

to maintain “traditional” political structures that allowed for a high degree of local self-governance.<sup>22</sup>

However Syrian Christians were more politically mobilized than Jews, pushing the limits of their new privileges, which augmented the anti-European and anti-Christian sentiments among the ulema, the ayans and the masses, which finally culminated in the outbreak of a brutal inter-communal violence among different communities. The 1850 Aleppo events, the Nablus riots in 1856 and the massacres of the Christians in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860 were the examples of these anti-Christian grievances among the Muslim community. Especially Lebanon and Damascus events of 1860 affected the Middle East and Syria deeply. In summer 1860, a bloody confrontation between the Druze and the Maronite communities of Lebanon spilled over Syria and the mobs consisted mainly of unemployed Muslim artisans who were displaced by the entrance of European manufactured goods in local markets attacked Christian community in Damascus and killed thousands of them with the help of the ulema and the ayans.<sup>23</sup>

Neither the Tanzimat nor the 1860s events changed the politics of notables which continued to be the most significant aspect of Syrian political culture in the 19th century. In addition Syrian Jews proceeded more cautiously, by and large avoiding political engagement and continuing to conduct themselves as dhimmi. As a result, although some sort of irritation might have emerged towards the Jews, they were seen as harmless whereas Christians were seen as the agents of Europeans.<sup>24</sup>

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22 Yaron Harel, *Syrian Jewry in Transition: 1840-1880*, (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010)

23 Eugene L. Rogan, “Sectarianism and Social Conflict in Damascus: The 1860 Events Reconsidered”, *Arabica*, Fasc. 4, October, 2004, p. 493

24 Zenner, *op. cit.* p.41

In this period the Damascus affair can be marked as the first signs of negative perception towards the Jews among the Syrians.<sup>25</sup> In order to turn the situation into their favor,<sup>26</sup> Christians created a myth that the Jews had indeed murdered a Christian monk in 1840 as part of a ritual murder, came to be known as one of the most important blood libels in Jewish history, the "Damascus Affair." This event, as Harel argues led to the creation of the antisemitic myth among Syrian Muslims as well as in the world. Harel reminds that 1986 the Affair was mentioned in the conclusion of then-Syrian defense minister Mustafa Tlass's famous book "The Matzoh of Zion".<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless the Jews living in Syria were not treated in a hostile way by the Syrians during the late Ottoman rule even though the first Aliyah took place in 1882<sup>28</sup> into Palestine, Southern Syria. This was partly because the Jewish settlement was not a matter of concern during the late Ottoman rule in general neither by the inhabitants of the land as well as the rulers in Istanbul, as the Aliyah was small in number and not widely organized as the Zionism was not evolved into its modern political version yet. In deed as long as Muslims in Syria preserved their dominant and favorable position, they were not really interested in such events like migration of small number of communities. Harel notes that the earliest reaction to Zionism and Aliyah in Syria was after the Young Turk Revolution in the newspaper Al-Muktabas. This antagonism was led by Shukri al-'Asli, who represented Damascus in the Ottoman parliament.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless in this stage Jewish settlers maintained contact with some Palestinian notables and there were contacts with Zionists to find a way to coexist from Syria.<sup>30</sup> The Jewish

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25 Zenner, op. cit. p. 28

26 Harel, Ha'aretz, ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Yaron Harel, op. cit.

29 From an e-mail correspondence with Yaron Harel, November 28, 2012

30 Mark Tessler, A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, (Indiana University Press, 1994), p.128

colonization of Palestine became a focal issue beginning after the First World War<sup>31</sup> among Syrians.

Syria's modern political history begins with the First World War, when it ceased being a small province in the Ottoman Empire and became the focus of wide international concern. The war period opened the door for series of domestic, regional and international developments that led Syria to move forward in its transformation to be a political entity. On the international level: at the center of this transformation was the partition of Ottoman lands through vaguely made war-time promises of the historic land of Syria to three different parties.<sup>32</sup>

First, in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (July 1915 – January 1916), the British government promised portions of Syria to the Ottoman governor of Mecca, the Sharif al-Hussein. Second, in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916, Syria was divided between Britain and France into southern (Palestine) and northern parts (Syria and Lebanon), Britain taking the former and France the latter. Third, the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 endorsed the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.

The three projections over Syria, signaled a fierce struggle over the land among the international, regional, as well as domestic actors. This three level struggle, together with the additional actors in time, would be the most significant determinant of Syrian foreign policy. The Jewish claims and the different reactions by the Syrian leaders and public to them would form the essential substance of both Syrian state formation as well as its foreign policy in general and towards the future Jewish state in particular.

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31 Tessler, op. cit. p.42

32 Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition*, (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 22

At the end of the First World War, Prince Faisal, the son of Sharif Hussein announced his intention to form an Arab government in Damascus including the whole Bilad al Sham.<sup>33</sup> However an independent Arab state in Syria was in direct conflict with the Sykes-Picot agreement<sup>34</sup> and the French opposition to Faisal's plans turned the British around.<sup>35</sup>

When Faisal became aware of Britain's agreement with the French he sought the ways of buttressing his diplomatic position wherever he could.<sup>36</sup> On January 3, 1919 Faisal reached an agreement with Dr. Chaim Weizmann, President of the Zionist Organization. Accordingly, Weizmann recognized Faisal as the head of a proposed Arab Kingdom-outside of Palestine, in return for Faisal's support for the immigration of Jews into Palestine on a large scale and recognizing Jewish claims as outlined in the Balfour Declaration.<sup>37</sup>

The Weizmann-Faisal agreement marked the first of the numerous talks by the leaders of Syrian national movement with the Zionists during the mandate. Zionist movement conducted countless efforts to win the acceptance of an Arab leader outside of Palestine to persuade Palestinians to cede part of the land to the Zionists. In exchange, they briefly considered backing plans for a regional Arab federation.<sup>38</sup>

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33 Ibid, p. 23

34 Anne Sinai, Pollack Allen, *The Syrian Arab Republic: A Handbook*, (American Academic Association for Peace in the Middle East, 1976, p.20)

35 Pipes, *ibid* p. 25

36 Ibid.

37 Laura Zittrain Eisenberg, Neil Caplan, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities*, (Indiana University Press, 1998) p. 7

38 Eyal Zisser, "Syria and Israel- Between War and Peace" in *Arab-Jewish Relations: From Conflict to Resolution?*, edited by Elie Podeh and Asher Kaufman, (Sussex Academic Press, 2006) p.115

Pipes notes that Faisal, like many Syrian political figures, in the period between 1918 and 1920, saw the Zionists as less of a danger, so he worked with Jewish leaders so long as they helped him achieve Greater Syria.<sup>39</sup> Yet it seems that Faisal reasoned that reaching an accommodation with the Zionists would help him to secure their support at the Paris Peace Conference for an independent Arab state. Therefore Faisal's aim was to guarantee a slice of territory under his rule, preferably the Greater Syria but he tended to settle on the pie given to him. On the contrary his radical supporters, namely the younger generation of the notables, and more importantly the Syrian public were decisive about an Arab Syria in the entire territory of Bilad al Sham.<sup>40</sup>

Thus despite not being implemented, the agreement caused an eruption of unrest and protests in Syria. It led to disappointment on the side of some Palestinian leaders, too, whose interest in union with Syria had always been precarious.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, seeking support against Zionism, the First Palestinian National Congress on January 27, 1919 demonstrated the general will of Palestinian nationalists to submerge Palestine as 'Southern Syria' into 'Greater Syria'.<sup>42</sup>

The agreement showed that Faisal's policy was in line with the pragmatic behavioral pattern that was developed during the late Ottoman rule by the Syrian notables. Therefore his behavior strengthened the pragmatic roots of Syrian foreign policy. In addition it created a chain of legacies. First of all it introduced the main paradox inherent in Syrian foreign policy: how pragmatism and ideology work together. While still continuing his efforts to achieve Greater Syria as defender of Arab nationalist goals, faced with the realities of great powers' designs and stubbornness, Faisal switched to a "Syria-first" policy when necessary.

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<sup>39</sup> Pipes, *op. cit.* p.25

<sup>40</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth-Century Syria*, (Valentine Mitchell, 2008), p. 12

<sup>41</sup> Pipes, *op. cit.* p.25

<sup>42</sup> Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims, A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999*, (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), p. 35



Therefore he sowed the seeds of subordinating ideology to pragmatism or in other words using ideology as a pragmatic tool. This would create a dilemma for Syrian foreign policy, the claim of being beating heart of Arab nationalism, anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist on the one hand, and pragmatic behaviors on the other. The whole picture of Syrian leaders' foreign policy acts would remain as mysterious at times as their intentions would be claimed or justified as serving the Arab cause but seeming to be pragmatic based on 'Syria first' on the other. Therefore Syria's policy towards Israel would follow an inconstant line, one swings between pragmatism and revisionism, including its treatment of the Palestinians, a trend that started to be developed during Faisal's reign. The coexistence of both trends, through their first interactions Syrian Arabs and Jews constructed a type of bilateral relationship that not only conflictual based on clashes but also compromises, albeit in leadership level. Syrian public unaccepted the presence of Yishuv starting even from pre-mandate era as illustrated by the reactions against Faisal-Weizmann Agreement. That is to say the animosity of Syrian masses towards the Jews would be a critical determinant of the swings from accommodative policies to the harsh ones, sometimes only at rhetorical level.

In the Paris Peace Conference convened on January 18, 1919 meant to end the World War I both Syrian and Zionist movements tried to reinforce their demands to the great powers. In line with the explanations made above, despite inwardly being aware of the clear-cut imperialists' plans, based on the popular support for a united Syria, Faisal proposed a commission of inquiry to ascertain the wishes of Syrian people.

On the other hand, Zionists appealed to the Conference to secure international acceptance for Balfour Declaration. Another remarkable Zionist demand was certain land concessions in the north of Palestine, namely the Golan Heights, to be included to their future land.<sup>43</sup> Zionists viewed the Golan Heights

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<sup>43</sup>Ghada Hashem Talhami, *Syria And The Palestinians The Clash Of Nationalisms*, (University Press Of Florida, 2001), p.10

as an integral part of Palestine for exclusive control over three sources of water; the Jordan River, Lake Houleh and Lake Tiberias and for security reasons.<sup>44</sup> Overlapping visions regarding the sources of water constituted the roots of the water problem between Israel and Syria.

The International Commission of Inquiry (King-Crane Commission) confirmed that Syrians demanded a unified Greater Syria encompassing Palestine but the conclusions of the commission were rejected by France and ignored by Britain.<sup>45</sup> In General Syrian Congress on March 7, 1920 the delegates from all parts of the greater Syria proclaimed Faisal as the king of Syria.<sup>46</sup> The Congress demanded full independence of Greater Syria including Lebanon and Palestine and rejected creation of Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.<sup>47</sup> However, as this did not cause any change in European powers' stance, in January 1920, Faisal and Clemenceau signed an agreement which openly made Syria a French mandate.<sup>48</sup> At San Remo on March 15, 1920 the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement were applied.<sup>49</sup> The boundaries of the mandates were drawn by a treaty between Britain and France on December 23, 1920.<sup>50</sup> The bulk of the Golan Heights was placed in the French sphere, giving French Syria permanent rights on three sources of water.<sup>51</sup> However the Zionists' plans for development of water resources of the Jordan River and its tributaries were not deterred.<sup>52</sup> Water tensions between

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44 Aryeh Shalev, *The Israel Syria Armistice Regime, 1949-1955* (Tel Aviv University, 1993), p. 19

45 Anne and Pollack, *op. cit.* p.20

46 Talhami, *op cit.* p.8

47 Tessler *op. cit.* p.156

48 Zeine N. Zeine, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Western diplomacy and the rise and fall of Faisal's kingdom in Syria*, (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1977), p.126

49 Talhami, *op cit.* p.7

50 Shalev, *op. cit.* p. 23-24

51 Talhami, *op cit* p. 10

52 Barbara J.Smith, *The Roots Of Separatism In Palestine: British Economic Policy, 1920-1929*, (Syracuse University Press,1993), p. 117-126

Syrians and Jews continued since that time.<sup>53</sup> The agreement was approved on March 7, 1923 and came to known as the “1923 international border” between Palestine and Syria.<sup>54</sup>

French troops entered Damascus on July 25, 1920 and overthrew Faisal.<sup>55</sup> During his short tenure, Damascus became a major center of anti-Zionist rhetoric and activity.<sup>56</sup> As Daniel Pipes quotes, Weizmann said: ‘the agitation against us in Palestine is conducted from Syria, not from Palestine.’<sup>57</sup> The end of the Faisal’s Arab regime marked a temporary loss of interests in Greater Syria<sup>58</sup> which one again rise and fall during the mandate.

The colonial experience of Syria, the final transformative step into a political entity, by and large shaped the main features of the modern Syrian state and the characteristics of its foreign policy in general, as well as its foreign policy towards Israel in particular, by strengthening the trends from the late Ottoman rule, the war time period and Faisal’s short reign, as well as adding new ones.

The Syrian animosity towards Israel is part of the general resentment of the Anglo-French partitioning of the pre-colonial geographic Syria. Yet as mentioned before enmity is only one of the complex set of determinants of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel. Zisser mentions that during the mandate period the leaders of Syrian national movement conducted numerous talks with the Zionists, believing that this could assist their own struggle for emancipation from French

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53 Talhami, op cit. p.11

54 Shalev, *ibid*.

55 Anne and Pollack, op. cit p. 21

56 Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The politics of Arab nationalism 1920-1945*, (Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 35

57 Pipes, op cit.56

58 Talhami, op. cit. 12

rule as well as bringing economic benefits.<sup>59</sup> Also the roots of both the most contentious issues of both conflict and the peace talks between Syria and Israel crystallize in this era.

Another determinant emerged during the mandate era originated from the Ibn Saud's victory over the competition with Sharif Hussein in Mecca and establishment of Saudi rule at the expense of the Hashemites in 1924 sowed the seeds of long-lasting enmity between the Hashemite and Saudi family, thus ignited the regional struggle for power over Syria which became one of the most important regional factors of Syrian foreign policy making.

The mandate rule led Syria suffered additional partitioning.<sup>60</sup> To begin with, on September 1, 1920, a state of "Greater Lebanon" was established adding the Muslim majority districts in the north and south and the city of Beirut to create an area in which the Christians formed the majority.<sup>61</sup> The rest of Syria was atomized along regional and ethnic lines.<sup>62</sup> The Latakia region, inhabited by Alawites, became a separate administrative unit, as did Jabal Druze and the district of Hatay. The states of Damascus and Aleppo were created, however later linked in a federation and then into "the state of Syria" in 1925 due to nationalist pressure and expense, while the relative autonomy of the three other regions continued.<sup>63</sup> Moreover territorial concessions were made to Turkey at the expense of Syria; in March 1921 Cilicia<sup>64</sup> and in June 1939, Hatay was ceded to Turkey.<sup>65</sup>

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59 Eyal Zisser, "Syria and Israel- Between War and Peace", p.115

60 Talhami, *ibid* p.12

61 Khoury, *op cit.* 57

62 Khoury, p. 58

63 Talhami, p.12

64 Pipes, p. 29

65 Talhami, p.12

Through the divide and rule policy the French strengthened disunity and divisiveness in Syrian society in a way to affect the future course of the modern Syrian state in every regard, which was an already a “fragile mosaic” of ethnic and sectarian communities.<sup>66</sup> One of them was, opposite to the Ottoman era, the support given to the minorities against the Sunni majority, specifically recruiting them to the local force that served as basis of future Syrian army.<sup>67</sup>

This led nationalism grow in strength in Syria. In response, the nationalist elite mobilized the urban masses to conduct several uprisings. As a result in 1928 Syria was permitted to have elections for a constituent assembly. Each of the new Syrian political movements that emerged in the new constitutional climate expressed a preference for the reconstitution of historic Syria, including the winner, National Bloc.<sup>68</sup> After that the National Bloc became the dominant power in Syrian politics and continued negotiations with France for gaining independence. During the negotiations, in 1930s, many other radical political movements appeared differing regarding their stance towards France and the Palestine Question. These radical movements left their mark on nationalist politics emerged in Syria.<sup>69</sup> They also played important role in exacerbating the future confrontation with Israel. Whereas a policy based on interests and ambition may be conducive to settlement and compromise, a policy constructed in ideological terms made these difficult.<sup>70</sup> One of them was the League of National Action advocated pan-Arab unity, influenced the development of Pan-Arabism and the emergence of the Ba’th.<sup>71</sup>

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66 Leverett, Flynt Lawrence, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial By Fire*. (Brookings Institution Press, 2005), p.1

67 Rabinovich, op cit. p. 24

68 Talhami, *ibid*.

69 Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, (Princeton University Press, 2003), p.80

70 Rabinovich, op. cit. p.177

71 Khoury, op. cit. p.627

In the meantime increasing Jewish immigration and land purchase, and recurring Arab protests and violence culminated in 1936-1939 Arab Revolt in Palestine. The Revolt was the first major test of the Syrian leaders' Arab nationalist credentials. Initially the National Bloc performed a valuable service. Damascus served as the political and operational center of the revolt.<sup>72</sup> Syria sponsored the General Command of the Arab Revolt in 'Southern Syria.' against the 1936 the Peel Royal Commission's report recommending Palestine's partition into a Jewish and an Arab state, a pan-Arab congress convened in Bludan, Syria in 1937 that voted to fight Zionism and coordinate insurrectionary activities as a reaction.<sup>73</sup> During the late 1930's many Palestinian guerilla fighters, wanted by the British, found political asylum in Syria.<sup>74</sup>

Besides, the popular support from Syria itself by a vast array of contributions ranging from money to jewelry as well as boycotting of Jewish products. Led by the League of Nationalist Action, Syrians took the streets of Damascus frequently demonstrating in solidarity with the Arab revolt accompanied by violently anti-Zionist and anti-British pamphlets and petition.<sup>75</sup> Most effectively, arms were smuggled from Syria to Palestine, and many Syrians volunteered into the guerrilla campaigns in Palestine.<sup>76</sup> Syrian sentiments of solidarity with Palestinians were augmented by a perception that in addition to their Arab kinship, Palestine also formed the southern tip of *Bilad al-Sham*.<sup>77</sup> The Syrians also were fearful of the prospect of a Jewish state that would be their

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72 Rabinovich, op. cit. p. 176

73 Tessler, op. cit. p 244

74 Robert G Rabil, Syria, The United States, And The War On Terror in The Middle East, (Praeger, 2006), p. 12

75 Rabil, ibid.

76 Khoury, p. 542-544.

77 Knudsen, Erik L., The Syrian-Israeli Political Impasse: A Study In Conflict, War And Mistrust, Diplomacy & Statecraft, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 2001, p. 214

immediate neighbor and could serve as an instrument of colonial policies, further undermining Arab unity and progress.<sup>78</sup>

On August 1, 1936 in Bludan, Syria, the leaders of Syrian Nationalist Bloc met the Jewish Agency's political department to seek the limited ways cooperation, while the Palestinian Arabs rejected any kind of cooperation with the Zionists. This meeting was one of the high points of the lengthy dialogue between Syrians and Jews, with the objective of entering into an official dialogue, which could have led a peaceful end to the conflict between the Jews and Arabs. As Zisser puts it, such dialogue was promising because it was based on Syrians' practical readiness to negotiate and acknowledge Jewish national rights in parts of Palestine, despite their ideological objection to the Zionist venture, and identification with the Palestinian aspirations.<sup>79</sup> They presented the idea of Arab unity as a solution to the Palestine problem for convincing the Zionists to support their unity schemes.<sup>80</sup> However the big gap between Arab and Jewish perspectives did not led any cooperation. The Zionists were determined to establish a state in Palestine, which the Arab nationalists would see as part of their united state.<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless this correspondence marked the strengthening of the pragmatic behavioral pattern of Syrian foreign policy, despite the animosity of Syrian masses, as well as dual nature of Syrian-israeli relations as it includes compromises along with clashes.

The National Bloc's support to the Palestinians tempered due to the prevalence of the avoidance of jeopardizing the negotiations with the French. In addition the landowning class and commercial bourgeoisie associated with the National Bloc leadership discouraged the prolongation of the Arab revolt because

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<sup>78</sup> Rabil, op.cit. p. 12

<sup>79</sup> Zisser, op. cit. p. 115

<sup>80</sup> Rabinovich, op. cit. p. 77

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

it disrupted trade with Palestine, hurting their economic interests. Rabil says that after the temporary loss of interest after the end of the Faisal's Arab regime, the renewed attention by the Syrian political elite to the Palestine issue was mainly due to the challenge posed by the League of National action. The National Bloc had sought to cooperate with France over signing of the independence treaty but it was leading nowhere. Under the attack from the League and facing the rising level of anti-Zionism of the public, the Bloc began to look at Palestine to rehabilitate its nationalistic image.<sup>82</sup>

Inspired by the legacy of their ancestors' policy of notables, the Bloc explained its political strategy towards France as "honorable cooperation" designed to maintain balance between France and the Syrian people.<sup>83</sup> Bloc members adopted the "Syria-first" policy instead of a pan-Arab unity to achieve independence. This formed another legacy; legacy of justification of pragmatic acts that are against the ideological aims claiming that they are honorable concessions at the end to serve the welfare of Arab nation.

During the mandate period, it was interesting to see how the second generation changed their stance. The ardent defenders of Arab nationalism finally came in line with their ancestors and the "politics of notables". In their hands, Arab nationalism came to be a means to rally Syrian society behind them and force France to recognize their intermediary role between society and France, and maintain status quo in favor of them. That is to say although the Arab nationalism was born in Syria and became one of the endless determinants of Syrian foreign policy, it started to be used as a pragmatic tool soon after it was introduced to Syrian politics. The second-generation urban families ruled Syria directly between 1946 and 1949, and continued their behavioral pattern of pragmatism, by aligning with external patrons for their domestic interests.

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82 Rabil op. cit. p. 13

83 Khoury, op. cit. p.539



The result of the commitment test showed that Palestine issue lay on the divide between the attraction of pan-Arabism, which enhanced the Bloc leaders' political posture, and the pull of Syrian provincialism, which safeguarded their interests.<sup>84</sup> Thus, on the eve of the Revolt most of the leaders of nationalist movement in Syria were prepared to relinquish, once again, at least formally and temporarily, the idea of 'Greater Syria' for the sake of the independence of the Syrian state.<sup>85</sup>

In June 1941 the French government declared the termination of the mandate and the independence of Syria was proclaimed on September 27, 1941. However the French was slow in transferring Syria to Syrians. In July 1943 elections were won by the National Bloc again and its leader Shukri Quwatli was elected as the president of Syria. Under his leadership Palestine was perceived as the inseparable part of Greater Syria and Arab unity.<sup>86</sup> Ma'oz remarks that had a slight chance existed for a Syrian-Zionist accord during the mandate, it was totally eliminated at its end, when Syria became independent under the leadership of President Quwwatli, a prominent pan-Arab politician. On April 17, 1946 Syrians celebrated the Independence Day following the withdrawal of the French troops.

In sum the colonial experience that laid the groundwork of the fundamental features of the Syrian state, its perception of self and external environment, also created certain habits for its foreign policy.

The partition of geographic Syria, on the one hand produced artificial designs and caused yearning for a Greater Syria, while on the other hand other designs proved rather durable, and in time developed ruling establishments with a vested interest in the statusquo as early as 1920s and 1930s.<sup>87</sup> For example in

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84 Rabil. op. cit. p. 13

85 Rabinovich op. cit. p. 74

86 Rabil, *ibid.*

87 Rabinovich, op cit. p. 14

order to secure their rule and to counterattack their domestic foes, the National Bloc leaders showed a renewed interest and support to the Palestinian cause during the revolt of 1936-1939. Conversely, the Bloc's cautious support to the Palestinian struggle not to upset treaty negotiations with France was a sudden shift from ideological to pragmatic politics. The numerous talks of the Syrian leaders with the Zionists, before and during the mandate are illustration of the same fashion.

Another related legacy was that the National Bloc was able to direct popular discontent away from the local structure of power in a way to prolong its reign thanks to the presence of an external threat.<sup>88</sup> This trend consolidated its place in the future course of the Syrian foreign policy towards Israel due to another mandate policy: supporting minorities as against the Sunni majority, which paved the way for minority rule. The more Syrian regimes rested on a narrow popular base, the more they emphasized the external threat- first and foremost Israel, in order to contain the internal instability and to guarantee the regime survival. Thereby the implication of this trend, which came to be one of the main determinants of Syrian foreign policy, was the radicalization of its stance towards Israel.

In overall conclusion looking at the background that Syrian state was constituted since the late Ottoman rule, it can be easily seen that the modern Syrian state came into existence neither for geographic or cultural reasons, nor because of actions taken by its inhabitants, but to serve external powers' interests. The external imposition of state boundaries which fragmented historic Syria brought an unstable political life, and a weak national identity due to Syrian state's lack of roots and historical legitimacy. Some of those aspects, as the state started to be consolidated, would be neutralized, while some of them proved to be continuous.

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88 Khoury, op cit. p. 620

The pre-independence rulers pursued shifting policies due to certain factors like the pressures from external and internal environments, and their vested interests that attached to the maintenance of the status quo. These patterns had been transferred to the foreign policy of the modern Syrian state. Syria established a course of following an inconstant policy towards Israel, one swings between pragmatism and revisionism. Therefore due to the coexistence of both trends, Syrian Arabs and the Jews, through their first interactions constructed a type of bilateral relationship that includes not only clashes but also compromises, albeit in leadership level.

Syrian public unaccepted the presence of Yishuv starting even from pre-mandate era as illustrated by the reactions against Faisal-Weizmann Agreement. By 1930s, as it was exemplified during the 1936-1939 revolt, Syrians were fully identified ideologically and emotionally with Palestinian cause. In addition they were seeing it as part of the wider Arab struggle against imperialism, such as their own nationalist struggle towards the French. Therefore no Syrian leader could gain credibility for a foreign policy that did not affirm Syria's pivotal role in defense of all Arab-causes, above all the struggle with Israel.<sup>89</sup> Hence, during the mid-1940s, the newly emerging Syrian Republic became the most anti-Zionist Arab state. Thus, the first war between Syria and Israel in 1948, was not the beginning of the hostile relations, rather was the result; the culmination of tensions created in the pre-independence period.

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89 Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Foreign Policy Of Syria", in Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami The Foreign Policies Of The Middle Eastern States, (Boulder, Colo. : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p.142

## CHAPTER 3

### SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ISRAEL IN 1946-1970

Syria embarked upon its career as a fully independent state with aspiration; however it soon found itself besieged with a set of problems, both internal and external. Internally, it was in many respects a state without nation and a political entity without a political community.<sup>90</sup> Therefore the priority of Syria's post independence leaders was to integrate Syrians into a unified society in order to form a national political community. The weakness of the Syrian body politic both made it necessary for external actors to struggle for control over the country and impossible for any of them to win the contest.<sup>91</sup> Therefore Syrian politics was closely linked to the developments in its external environment which left Syria at the conjunction of three circles of conflict.

The struggles for power inside Syria were firstly linked with conflicts on the wider stage of Arab politics. The competition between the Hashemite dynasty (Faisal's Iraq with the aim of Fertile Crescent and Abdullah's Jordan with the aim of Greater Syria) and their Arab rivals (Egypt and Saudi Arabia) that had been in progress since the end of the World War I, brought the dilemma of who to unite or at least pursue close relations with for Syrian policy makers.<sup>92</sup> In addition the coups and counter coups were often orchestrated by rival Arab powers.<sup>93</sup> The regional conflicts in turn were connected with the rivalries of the great powers, which changed its nature with the beginning of the Cold War. Rising Cold War tensions added the question of either to be pro-US or pro-Soviets to the Syrian

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90 Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle For Power in Syrian: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, (I.B. Tauris, 1996), p.5

91 Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A study in Post-War Arab Politics 1945-1958*, (Yale University Press, 1987), p. xiii

92 Ibid, p. 1

93 Ibid, p. 145

foreign policy. Therefore as Syrian state became a place where competing blocs vied for control, Syrian foreign policy in this period fluctuated between shifting alliances both in regional and international level.

Third conflict was the Arab-Jewish controversy that entered a new stage with the establishment of the state of Israel. Following the independence, Syrian leaders had faced a demand to save Palestine by almost all the segments of the country. There were different opinions regarding the unity projects, but the feeling against Zionism was unanimous. However lacking a strong army and dependable regional allies, as well as prioritizing their internal aims, the leaders, preferred to keep their heads buried in the sand.<sup>94</sup>

November 1947 became a turning point in Syrian foreign policy towards the Yishuv as the UN adopted the Partition Plan for Palestine. The Plan caused widespread demonstrations in Syria's major cities.<sup>95</sup> Syria decided to assume a leading role in opposing to any division plan and have an all-out struggle against the Yishuv.<sup>96</sup> According to Talhami the reason behind this was Syria's feeling of insecurity and inability to remove the stress of Palestine problem in Syrians' mind.<sup>97</sup> Syria became the first Arab state to implement the Arab League's policies in response to the UN Plan, i.e. the immediate recruitment and military training of volunteers. The first training camp was founded at Qatana, near Damascus. As Joshua Landis puts it, Syria began to care about Palestine much less after it became independent however it began to swing into action faster than other Arab countries.<sup>98</sup> In addition, Syria initiated its own militant measures. In late 1947 to

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94 Joshua Landis, "Syria in the 1948 Palestine War: Fighting King Abdullah's Greater Syria Plan", in Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., *Rewriting the Palestine War: 1948 and the History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 178-205

95 Seale, op. cit. p. 34

96 Moshe Ma'oz, *Syria And Israel From War To Peace Making*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 16-17

97 Ghada Hashem Talhami, *Syria and The Palestinians, The Clash Of Nationalism*, (Florida University Press, 2001), pp. 26-27

98 Landis, *ibid.*

prevent the creation of the Jewish state, an irregular paramilitary force, the Liberation Army, trained and commanded by Syrian army officers was formed. However this irregular army served ironically to reflect the dynamics of inter-Arab relations as well as Syria's stance towards the Palestinian issue. By sending the volunteer army into battle, Quwwatli aimed; saving Syrian troops to be exposed to defeat, preventing possible attack from King Abdullah following the defeat, and preventing Palestinian forces from occupying parts of Palestine without coordination with Syria. Consequently, due to the failure of the Liberation Army, Syria joined the other three Arab armies in invading Palestine in the day after Israeli state was declared on May 14, 1948.<sup>99</sup>

Eyal Zisser states that Syria's participation to the 1948 War wasn't inevitable considering the promising dialogue between Syrian nationalists and Zionists in the pre-independence era.<sup>100</sup> Actually, however, as he concludes, there was an unbridgeable gap between the will of the leaders, and their ability to recruit support for it in the public opinion. Rabinovich attributes the real role to the network of inter-Arab dynamics in Syria's joining to the war.<sup>101</sup> Joshua Landis also asserts that the fear of playing Syria into Jordanian hands dictated Syria's diplomatic and military strategy from September 1947 onwards. For instance, President Quwatli was pushed to anti-Hashemite Egypt and Saudi Arabia into a defensive alignment.<sup>102</sup>

As a result of the war, Israel expanded its boundaries beyond those demarcated by Partition Plan. Despite its passivity throughout the war not to provoke Israeli retaliation that would undermine the regime, among the Arab

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99 Ma'oz, *ibid.* p. 18

100 Eyal Zisser, "Syria and Israel- Between War and Peace" in *Arab-Jewish Relations: From Conflict to Resolution?*, edited by Elie Podeh and Asher Kaufman, (Sussex Academic Press, 2006) p.115

101 Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth-Century Syria*, (Valentine Mitchell, 2008), pp. 176,177

102 Rabinovich, *op. cit.* 145

forces, only Syria had succeeded in capturing three small areas inside Palestine's territory awarded to Israel. These areas; the strategic border area north of the Lake Tiberias and a strip of land east of the Lake, would be the focus of the future bilateral conflict.<sup>103</sup>

Syria's sense of deprivation caused by truncation of its historic territory went beyond frustration over the creation of Israel. In the eyes of the Syrians, Israel was an imperialist-created colonial settler state unjustly implanted in the heart of the Arab world, at the expense of a territory, not only contiguous to Syrian land but considered part of it. Moreover the Jewish state was perceived as a security threat and an obstacle to Arab unity. Therefore Syria increasingly regarded itself as the embodiment of Arab nationalist aspirations as against the achievements of Zionism and refused to accept Israel's legitimacy, as well as to sign an armistice agreement.<sup>104</sup>

Beside the Israeli threat, Syria's unprotected boundaries were under threat by Arab states, even more than they were before the war. The conflict with Israel forced Syria to maintain alliances which often came at a price for Syrian sovereignty.<sup>105</sup> Syria's vulnerability, moreover, extended to its ideology as the war revealed the new conflicting interests of various segments of the 'Greater Syria'.

1948 war had long lasting effects on Syrian domestic politics, too. It shattered the newly independent state's effort for state building.<sup>106</sup> In addition the defeat exacerbated the already expanding political consciousness, due to the dissatisfaction toward the traditional ruling authority, which gave way to the

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103 Ma'oz, op. cit. p. 19

104 Robert Rabil, *Embattled Neighbors Syria, Israel, and Lebanon* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), p. 5

105 Malik Mufti, *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq*, (Cornell University Press, 1996), p 43

106 Rabinovich, op. cit. 145

formation of political parties. These parties adopted nationalist-secularist ideologies and attracted non-Sunni minorities to their ranks<sup>107</sup> such as the Ba'th.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, the war ignited Syria's record of instability owing to the political ascendancy of the military who grew disillusioned with civilian leadership.<sup>109</sup>

On January 13, 1949, the parties began the armistice talks based on the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 62. After awhile the Syrian leaders decided to reach at least an armistice agreement that would be positively accepted by the public as an Arab achievement, so as to prevent the potential threat to Syrian security as well as their own rule by the militarily powerful Jewish state.<sup>110</sup> However, the coup d'etat by Colonel Husni Za'im<sup>111</sup> on March 30, 1949 postponed the scheduled armistice talks until April; while Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan concluded their armistice agreements. The pragmatic policies of Husni Za'im

In the negotiations began on April 21, 1949 Syria insisted that the armistice line should conform to the war's outcome whereas Israel maintained that it must correspond to the international boundary.<sup>112</sup> However Za'im's offer to reach a full peace settlement, as well as settling 250,000 or 300,000 of total 700,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria, shifted Syria's diplomatic position. Za'im, seeing Israel within the sphere of regional power politics rather than ideological terms, wanted to neutralize the Hashemite and Israeli threats<sup>113</sup> in order to make

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107 Rashid Khalidi, 'Ottomanism And Arabism In Syria Before 1914: A Reassessment' in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, ed. Khalidi et al. (Columbia University Press, 1991), p.58

108 Seale, op. cit. p. xiv

109 Mufti, op. cit. p 49

110 Ma'oz, op. cit, pp. 21-25

111 Rabil, op. cit. p. 11

112 Shalev, op. cit. p. 29

113 Rabil, op. cit p. 13



Syria a stable nation-state that plays an independent role in regional politics.<sup>114</sup> Most importantly Za'im's aim called for the US support<sup>115</sup> that could be granted only after the Israeli-Syrian conflict had been settled.<sup>116</sup> However Ben Gurion rejected the offer and Husni Za'im was overthrown by another coup on August 14, 1949. The episode was regarded by some Israeli new historians as a missed chance for peace. In reality, Israeli leaders were very satisfied with the armistice agreements and far from eager to make a peace that would entail substantial Israeli concessions. Consequently only an armistice agreement was signed between Syria and Israel on July 20, 1949, when Syria had come to terms to pull out from all territory seized. These areas were defined as demilitarized zones (DMZ)<sup>117</sup> by the UN to avert further conflict, and placed under the supervision of the Mixed Armistice Commission (MAC). Ironically though, because the armistice agreement which was designed to be temporary solution remained as the basis of the relations neither side had the sovereignty over them, DMZs, would be the root of the future confrontation. The years of conflict had begun over control of the DMZs and of the water sources in the area in the early 1950s, becoming a zero-sum struggle in 1953-54<sup>118</sup> and culminating in the 1967 war.

The conflict generated from Israeli activity in the DMZ as a strategy to assert sovereignty all the way to the 1923 boundary, which evoked a Syrian military reaction, leading to a military response from Israel. Syria initially, too weak to resist Israeli reactions, complained to the MAC and initiated talks

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114 Ma'oz, op. cit, pp. 19-25

115 Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), p 72-73

116 Jerome Slater, "Lost Opportunities For Peace In The Arab-Israeli Conflict Israel And Syria, 1948-2001", *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Summer 2002), p. 86

117 The DMZ comprises three areas: one in the north, next to Tel Dan, the second south of Lake Huleh lying on both extending to the boundary line. Importantly, the Syrians controlled the ten-meter strip of beach and the east bank of the Jordan River, as well as Arab villages east of Lake Tiberias, such as al-Hamma and Khirbet al-Tawafiq. So the Syrians exercised effective control over the northern shore of Lake Tiberias. Rabil, op. cit. p. 9

118 Zeev Maoz, Ben D. Mor, *Bound by Struggle: The Strategic Evolution of Enduring International Rivalries*, (University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 181

between the representatives of both countries, however Israel continued creating facts on the ground.<sup>119</sup> The exchange of fire that ensued on April–May 1951 caused de facto partition of the DMZ. The de facto border known as the line of June 4, 1967 that Syria insists to be re-created in a final settlement, remained in place until the 1967 war despite some alterations—all minor and all at Syria’s expense.<sup>120</sup>

During the unofficial meetings between summer 1951 and May 1953, Syrian President Colonel Shishakli offered a non-belligerency agreement that provided for the absorption of half a million Palestinian refugees, on the condition that Syria would receive \$200 million for economic development.<sup>121</sup> As Rabil asserts the offer was very similar to Za’im’s initiative,<sup>122</sup> aiming more at improving relations with the US than with Israel. Also Shishakli, who had an objective of building a strong army that would be instrumental in protecting his regime against internal and Hashemite plots, and any Israeli attack,<sup>123</sup> realized the constraint of the Tripartite Declaration issued by Britain, France, and the US in May 1950, opposing the use of force between any of the states in the area and making the supply of arms conditional on nonaggression.<sup>124</sup> However it was rejected by Israel because it involved giving up lands west of the 1923 international boundary which were formally under Israel’s sovereignty and vital to its national irrigation and development projects.<sup>125</sup> Although the unofficial meetings that continued over two years did not lead to an agreement, enabled the

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119 Rabil, op. cit. p. 9

120 Israel established control over the western sector to the west bank of the Jordan River, and Syria retaining control over the northeast corner of the lake and the east bank of the river. Rabil, *ibid.* 10

121 Interview with Dr. Yigal Kipnis, November 8, 2010 in the settlement of Ma’ale Gamlah, the Golan Heights, Israel.

122 Rabil, op. cit. p. 14

123 *Ibid* p. 13

124 Shalev op. cit. p. 31

125 Ma’oz (1995), op. Cit., p. 29

sides to conduct pragmatic talks whereby tension along the border was significantly reduced.<sup>126</sup>

In late 1953's, the resumed tensions constituted the first crisis between Syria and Israel over the Jordan River diversion project which in the 1960s would be the core of the conflict escalating to the war of 1967. Until 1954 the management of the water dispute was political and non-violent.<sup>127</sup> Actually the general course of the relations between Syrian Arabs and Jews until 1954 entailed not only clashes but also compromises.<sup>128</sup> Therefore the year 1954 became a watershed that ended contact and cooperation between the sides. Syria's attitudes towards Israel became more militant, owing to significant political changes in domestic, regional and international environments.

Shishakli's ouster in February 1954 marked the first breaking point in Syrian foreign policy in changing its axis from the West to the East. The domestic instability coincided with perceptions of a rising threat from Israel as border skirmishes escalated and increased Syria's need protective alignment. The shift of internal political balance to the left brought close relations with Nasser's Egypt in the regional, and with the USSR in the international level.<sup>129</sup> In late 1954 Syria became the first Arab state to sign an arms deal with the USSR,<sup>130</sup> preceding the Czechoslovak-Egyptian deal of September 1955.<sup>131</sup> Due to the arms deals, Syria and Egypt found themselves in an agreement fully opposing the West, which was in their view, the support behind Israel. Syrian-Egyptian entente signaled the

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126 Kipnis, *ibid.*

127 Ma'oz *op. cit.* 245

128 Shalev *ibid.* p. 45

129 Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Foreign Policy Of Syria", in Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami *The Foreign Policies Of The Middle Eastern States*, (Boulder, Colo. : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p.145

130 Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, (Cornell University Press, 1987), p.62

131 Galia Golan, *Soviets Policies in the Middle East: from World War Ttwo to Gorbachev*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p 140

second breaking point in Syrian foreign policy.<sup>132</sup> Along with the spectacular growth of Egyptian influence in Syrian affairs,<sup>133</sup> the door opened to the full flood of Soviet and Eastern European arms, trade, credits, exchange visits of all sorts and bilateral agreements. Nevertheless between 1955 and 1958 Syria sought to manipulate the inter-bloc conflict for its own interests,<sup>134</sup> namely its relations the USSR wasn't based on ideology.<sup>135</sup> As late as 1957 the President Quwatli would declare that had there was no Israel unrelentingly treated preferentially by the US, Syria would have not approached to the Soviets in order to acquire new weapons.

With the signing of February 1955 of the Baghdad Pact, because the fate of the pact was believed to turn on Syria's choice, a regional and international international 'struggle for Syria' took place until 1958.<sup>136</sup> On 20 October 1955 Egypt and Syria signed a defense pact. On December 11, 1955, Israel launched a major attack on a Syrian position north of Lake Tiberias following a dispute regarding the fishing and navigation rights of Syria given by the mandatory agreements. This raid, believed to be response to the Syrian-Egyptian defense pact,<sup>137</sup> was carried out 'with excessive zeal'<sup>138</sup> and represented a temporary peak in hostilities between Israel and Syria. Also the both sides' attention would soon turn to Suez, which shattered any hope of reconciliation of Syria with the West.

Against the Anglo-French and Israeli invasion of Egypt in October 1956, Syria, tied to Egypt by their military pact, took Egypt's side, albeit rhetorically. Syria's attitude was driven by concern about a simultaneous attack on Syria, as

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132 Seale op cit. p. 251

133 Ibid.

134 Rami Ginat, *Syria and the Doctrine of Arab Neutralism: From Independence to Dependence*, (Sussex Academic Press, 2005), p 43

135 Ibid.

136 Hinnebusch, *ibid.*

137 Seale, *ibid.* p. 254

138 Maoz, Mor, p. 182

well as an overthrow of the regime in the face of another military defeat.<sup>139</sup> This inaction helped to instigate a period of relative calm until 1960 in Syrian-Israeli border relations.<sup>140</sup> However in the wider sense, the war radicalized the conflict due to Israel's collusion with the ex-imperialist powers in a way to prove that Israel's being imperialists' cats-paw in the Middle East.<sup>141</sup> Moreover the Suez war signaled that when the time was right, Israel could initiate total war. This fear accelerated acquisition of advanced weaponry from the USSR.<sup>142</sup> While Syrian-Soviet relations reached its peak, the downward curve in Syrian-American relations hit bottom. Nevertheless Syrian foreign policy of 1957 was Janus-faced. The influential Ba'th party favored unity with Egypt while the pro-Soviet groups wanted Syria to ally with the USSR.<sup>143</sup> The struggle for power in Syria this time was between Egypt and the USSR.<sup>144</sup> By the foundation of the United Arab Republic in 1958, the winner once again became Egypt. Beside the fear from Israel that created interest in linking with a powerful army<sup>145</sup> and belief in Nasser's leadership in raising the Arab pride; Ba'thi will to reduce the danger of the communist challenge also played a role in the unification.<sup>146</sup> The Iraqi, and Jordanian threats and the U.S. strategy of isolating radical Arab regimes through the formation of regional military pacts were other two reasons.

However soon after, the Ba'thists was frustrated by the authoritarian structure that Nasser established. In the meantime another factor added to the frustration of the Ba'thists. In 1958 Israel initiated an alternative plan, tapping

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139 Seale, op. cit. p.261

140Maoz, Mor, p. 183

141 Morris, p. 300

142 Kipnis, *ibid.*

143 Ginat, p. 173

144 Ginat, p. 197

145 Talhami, op. cit. p. 74

146 Seale, *ibid.* p.311

water from the Lake Tiberias and channeling it to the Negev via the National Water Carrier.<sup>147</sup> The UAR's Southern Region Egypt supported a technical solution, while the Northern Region Syria favored use of military force, stemming from factors.<sup>148</sup> First, Syrian Ba'th party characterized Israel's water plan within the context of the Arab struggle against Israel. It viewed the counter-Arab strategy to the plan as the one that would lead to the destruction of Israel.<sup>149</sup> Second Israel's diversion program was seen as primarily a Syrian problem, as a threat to its riparian interests. Third, the Ba'th position arose from the rivalry with Egypt for Arab public opinion regarding the way to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The traumatic breakup of the UAR on September 28, 1961 by the rebellion of Syrian army<sup>150</sup> deeply affected the new Syrian state. As Egypt refused to recognize the new Syrian state,<sup>151</sup> Syria facing the threat of external isolation, used Arab nationalism, Palestine and its competition with Egypt to justify its existence.<sup>152</sup> Questions of national identity became prominent in the period 1961-63. The relations with the USSR cooled down.<sup>153</sup> There split between the supporters of alliance with Iraq, Saudi Arabia and reuniting with Egypt. Inside Syria, there were coups and counter coups and street fighting between Nasserites, and communists and Ba'thists. This blow to Arab unity also created a split within the Ba'th: the ones in support of the secession and others called for a renewal of the union.<sup>154</sup> The reconstitution of the Ba'th thereafter exhibited a different face,

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147 Ma'oz op. cit. p. 246

148 Ibid. p 258

149 Ibid. p 247

150 Charles Patterson, Hafez al Asad of Syria, (iUniverse, 2000), p. 42

151 Rabinovich, op. cit. p.177

152 Ibid, p. 178

153 Ginat, op. cit. p. 219

154 Patterson, ibid. p.67

focusing less on Arab unity.<sup>155</sup> Finally in March 1963 the Ba'th Party assumed power in Syria through a military coup.

Upon assumption of power, Ba'th regime targeted eliminating its domestic and external foes. It increased the Ba'thist ranks both in military and civilian sectors, recruiting mostly Alawis, as well as suppressing Nasserites so as to be independent from Egyptian influence. Also the regime reestablished the relations with the USSR.<sup>156</sup> The regime translated its anti-Israeli ideology into a militant opposition to Israel,<sup>157</sup> who in the meantime seized most of the disputed areas, won exclusive control of the Lake Tiberias and neared the completion of its project to divert the Jordan's waters to the Negev.<sup>158</sup>

In 1963 late summer the Ba'th threatened Israel to go to war against it. The aim was to obstruct the imminent completion of Israel's water carrier as well as sending a political message to Egypt. By launching a hopeless heroic war, Syria aimed at obliging Egypt to come to its aid so that the bilateral Egyptian-Israeli feud would be resolved.<sup>159</sup> In response Egypt conveyed the first Arab Summit where a comprehensive strategy towards Israel's National Water Carrier was formulated in January 1964.<sup>160</sup> Opposite to the Syrian demand to initiate total war against Israel, it was decided to establish a joint Arab military command under the authority of Egypt as well as to divert the Jordan River's water.<sup>161</sup> Also the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded to surface the other anti-establishment organizations under the patronage of Egypt. Followed by this, Syria

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155 Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria Under the Ba'th, 1963-66: The Army Party Symbiosis*, (Israeli University Press, 1972), pp.86-88, 244-250

156 Ginat, *ibid.* p. 225

157 Rabil, *op. cit.* p. 16

158 Rabil, *ibid.*

159 Rabinovich, *The View From Damascus*, p. 229

160 *Ibid.*

161 Kipnis, *ibid.*

began to provide patronage to acts of sabotage carried out by the Fatah, an anti-establishment organization, from Lebanon, Jordan and inside Israel.<sup>162</sup> Also Syria became the first and only state to begin the diversion project in November 1964<sup>163</sup> four months after Israel's National Water Carrier had been operational<sup>164</sup> risking Israel's viewing it as a *casus belli*.<sup>165</sup> Throughout 1965 and 1966, Syria continued the diversion work although in September 1965, the Arab summit formally withdrew its support from the Syrian project. When Israel responded with ground and aerial strikes, Syria continued its policy of not giving military reaction, and slowed down the work and furthered away from the border.<sup>166</sup>

In 1966 the radical wing of the Ba'th ousted its rivals by a coup that consolidated the rule of Alawite minority. As Ma'oz argues, this regime which adopted the most extreme anti-Israel policy since the beginning of the conflict, had the narrowest socio-political base, thus warmongering against Israel was one way to cover its domestic instability. The Ba'th congress of February 23, 1966 accepted the Palestine problem as the main axis of Syria's domestic, Arab and international policies.<sup>167</sup> The regime's more assertive position vis a vis Israel was part of its attempt to be the true vanguard of Arab nationalism.<sup>168</sup> The Ba'th asserted the doctrine of "war of popular liberation" as a fresh and revolutionary-contribution to the Arab struggle against Israel, as against Egypt's –routine and traditionalist- reliance on regular armies and conventional warfare.<sup>169</sup> Accordingly

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162 Seale op. cit. p.119

163 Rabil, op. cit. p 17

164 Kipnis, ibid.

165 Zeev Schiff, *Peace With Security: Israel's Minimal Security Requirements in Negotiations With Syria*, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1993), p. 13

166 Rabil, ibid. p. 17

167 Rabinovich, op. cit. p. 178

168 David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar Al-Asad and Modern Syria*, (Yale University Press, 2005), p 24

169 Rabinovich, ibid. pp. 178-179



the Ba'thi radicals argued that, while Israel might have been militarily superior, the Arabs could prevail in a in which the numerically superior Arab masses, the Arab armies, and Arab oil would be fully mobilized to lead the collapse of Israel.

In order to have a generous loan to finance the building of a major army for their struggle against Israel, the new Ba'th improved the relations with the Soviets. In addition to intensifying its support of guerilla raids and trying to stop Israeli projects<sup>170</sup>, the regime also decided to directly confront the Israeli troops along the DMZ<sup>171</sup>, including an extensive use of air power.<sup>172</sup> Any entrance of an Israeli tractor was answered by fire from the Syrian outposts on the Golan Heights. The Israelis were always swift in their riposte and the violence between the two sides in the years 1966–1967 always hovered on the brink of war. Israeli leaders also radicalized in their discourses; threatening a large-scale military action aimed at overthrowing the Syrian rulers.<sup>173</sup>

On July 14, 1966 Israel destroyed Syrian earth-moving machinery and in the course of a dog fight, one Syrian fighter plane was shot down. Syria again refrained from reacting. This attack in effect capped the lid on Syria's diversion activity, although some minor cosmetic clearing away continued until the 1967 war.<sup>174</sup> The Ba'th regime was thwarted between its ideological commitments and its ability to implement them.<sup>175</sup> The need to bolster its shattered prestige led Syria step up its support for guerilla operations as well as its efforts to convince Egypt to reestablish alliance.<sup>176</sup> Finally the USSR on 7 November 1966 helped engineer

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170 Bar Simantov, *Linkage Politics in the Middle East: Syria Between Domestic and External Conflict, 1961-1970*, (West View Press, 1983), pp. 147-72

171 Lensch, *op. cit.* p. 24

172 Fred Lawson, *Why Syria Goes to War: Thirty Years of Confrontation*, (Cornell University Press, 1996), p 21

173 Maoz, Mor, p. 186

174 Ma'oz p. 254

175 Ibid.

176 Lawson ,*ibid.* p 21

a defense agreement between the Arab cold war rivals to give the ability to Syria to threaten Israel of a multi-front war. No longer able to restrain the Syrians through the mechanism of Arab summits, Nasser at last signed the pact.<sup>177</sup> The defense pact bolstered Syria's self confidence that was soon reflected on the border.<sup>178</sup> Throughout the spring of 1967, Syria adopted a more belligerent stance in its interaction with Israel.<sup>179</sup> The peak in border clashes took place on 7 April 1967<sup>180</sup> when six Syrian fighter planes were shot down.<sup>181</sup>

In May 1967 the Muslim Brothers rebelled against the regime. The Ba'th regime in its desperation had begun propaganda through the media that these were acts of subversion by Israel. One might wonder why the Soviets, who at the time was trying to apply a détente policy and therefore was wary of a war between Israel and Syria, did not exert pressure on Syria. The answer is that Syrian-Soviets relations were one of the tail-wagging the dog. Ironically, on May 13 the Soviets delivered a false intelligence report regarding Israeli troop concentrations on the Syrian border. Unsurprisingly, Syrians quickly passed the information on to Cairo. By May 14, Moscow already felt it had lost control over events in the Middle East. Nasser mounted a course that made the war inevitable in an effort to keep up his prestige and pan-Arab leadership. In order to deter an Israeli attack, he ordered the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from the Sinai and deployed Egyptian troops there and closed the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping.<sup>182</sup>

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177 Seale, op cit. 126

178 Ginat, op. cit. p. 230

179 Lawson, op. cit. pp. 20-21

180 Kipnis, *ibid.*

181 Rabinovich, op. cit. .p 232

182 Rabinovich, *ibid.* pp. 21-22

In the moment of truth, Syria did everything to avoid the war. It was one thing to bring the matters to the brink of war in the service of political aims, but crossing the brink was another matter.<sup>183</sup> However of the many factors at work that had a part in leading to the third Arab-Israeli war, the main role is attributed to Syrian Ba'th regime.

Lawson singles out Syria's entry to 1967 War as a classic case of external behavior shaped by domestic constraints and considerations. Accordingly the Ba'th regime saw walking to the brink with Israel as means of survival.<sup>184</sup> Zisser admits that the hostility towards Israel was a sine qua non for the Ba'th in gaining belonging and acceptance by the very core of Syrian society. Moreover he argues, in the process of the crystallization of the Syrian state, the Syrian-Israeli conflict served as a central component in the fashioning of Syria's identity.<sup>185</sup> However he pays more importance to Syria's secession from the UAR and the inter-Arab dynamics occurred afterwards as the conditions prepared the war.<sup>186</sup> Likewise, Rabinovich, admitting the deliberate policy of provocation of the Ba'th regime, argues that the dynamics of inter-Arab relations, rivalries in the mid-1960s and Syria's bilateral relations with Egypt between 1963 and 1967 are particularly significant.<sup>187</sup> Ma'oz values a comprehensive set of reasons like Israeli activism, the Soviet and Egyptian roles, and mistaken Syrian assumptions about Israel's might and intentions.<sup>188</sup> Yigal Kipnis also adds Israel's discourse as a fuelling force that supplied the Syrian regime with good reason to be concerned for its existence.<sup>189</sup>

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183 Rabinovich, *ibid* p. 233

184 Lawson, *ibid.* p. 51

185 Zisser, "Syria and Israel- Between War and Peace" pp. 118-119

186 *Ibid.*

187 Rabinovich, *op. cit.* p. 229

188 Moshe Ma'oz, *Israel and Syria from War to Peacemaking*, pp 79-111

189 Kipnis, *ibid.*

As the ambiguous terms of the July 1949 left the both sides holding strategically important but vulnerable territories and locked them into a security dilemma,<sup>190</sup> the clash was inevitable, but the timing was merely incidental.<sup>191</sup> Syrian reaction to outbreak the war was shock and restraint. The shock was caused by the destruction of the Syrian air force within the first four hours and the collapse of the Egyptian and Jordanian armies during the first days of the war. The restraint was a result of the awareness of Syrian weakness and the futility of offensive action.<sup>192</sup>

Within the span of few days, Israel defeated the Arab armies and occupied the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank including East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The “game of inches” that had been underway between 1954 and 1967 for control of the DMZ, that always fought to the advantage of Israel, finally resulted in the concrete Israeli victory.<sup>193</sup> Significantly enough, by June 10, 1967 (the Israeli-Syrian ceasefire), the line of June 4 which conceptually reflected the disposition of the Israeli and Syrian forces confronting each other in the DMZ, was well to the rear of Israeli forces. This new status quo marked the start of a new chapter in the history of the region. Besides, the war affected the Arab states emotionally and culturally in a very deep and long-lasting fashion.

Israel’s expanded boundaries meant strategic depth, defensible borders and buffer zones that even the most organized and united Arab forces would not be able to defeat it. Therefore the Jewish state was now seen by the US as a decisive military power, regional superpower and desirable ally.<sup>194</sup> The 1967 war heralded

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190 Lawson, op. cit. p. 20

191 Richard Parker, ‘The June 1967 War: Some Mysteries Explored’, Middle East Journal, Vol. 46, No. 2, Spring 1992, P. 178

192 Maoz, Mor, op. cit. p. 186

193 Frederic C. Hof, Mapping Peace Between Syria and Israel, (United States Institute of Peace, 2009), p. 5

194 Morris, op. cit. p. 329

an expansion of the American presence that went hand in hand with a decline in Soviet influence in the region. Contrarily Syria's reliance and dependence grew on full Soviet support to get back the Golan.<sup>195</sup>

The traumatic defeat discredited the radicalism in Arab politics in general, as for Syria in a way to strengthen the hands of the moderates in the Ba'th, and become the catalyst for Asad's rise to power. In addition, along with the failures of the 1960s, namely the death of the UAR and lack of effective conceptualization and coordination against the Zionist enemy, Israel's victory became a testimony to pan-Arabism's frail condition, since Arab leaders paved their road to war with the language of pan-Arabism.<sup>196</sup>

The war became a watershed in Syrian-Israeli relations, locking the two countries into permanent zero-sum hostility with adding a territorial dimension.<sup>197</sup> The Ba'th regime which had claimed to possess the key to the liberation of Palestine, now had to explain the loss of its own territory<sup>198</sup> and the deployment of Israeli troops 40 miles from the Syrian capital.

It took time for the Ba'th to conceptualize a new policy towards the new Israel because after defeat, two schools of thought within the Ba'thi Syrian state crystallized and provoked an intra-Ba'thi power struggle and paved the way for Asad's coming to power. The radicals were determined to maintain the militant course and wanted to commit Syria to the people's liberation war, namely the continuation of the guerilla raids. Asad and his realist faction also rejected the legitimacy of Israel, but, for them, the 1967 defeat forced the realization that Syria

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195 Ginat, op. cit. p. 230

196 Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, (Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 500

197 Hinnebusch, op. Cit. p. 142

198 Rabinovich, op. cit. p. 179

could do little to reverse the establishment of the Zionist state.<sup>199</sup> Asad was also well aware that the failure of radicalism and ideologically motivated policies caused the 1967 defeat.

As Asad saw it, two major dilemmas were inherent in post-war situation. The first was posed by the peace initiatives of the US designed to draw Egypt and Jordan into separate deals with Israel. Ironically the war opened a possible way of solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict as Israel gained something to give in exchange for peace to Arabs.<sup>200</sup> Asad was not a rejectionist but he favored only a dishonorable and partial peace.<sup>201</sup> Second dilemma was the guerilla organizations, which gained more popularity, funding and recruitment as a result of the defeat of conventional armies. Asad saw clearly the contest with Israel as one between conventional armies in which irregulars were dangerous. For Asad, the 1967 war proved that the guerilla raids had played Syria into Israel's hands.<sup>202</sup>

The Ba'th formulated a policy towards Israel in summer 1967 and pursued till the end of 1970. It rested on the assertion that the line chosen by the party had been correct; the armed struggle and the popular war were still the best means of achieving a fundamental solution to the Palestine problem, whilst running a minimal risk of Israeli retaliation.<sup>203</sup> The liberation of the Golan Heights was framed as part of this bigger aim, so there was no need to concede Arab rights in Palestine in order to regain the Golan. Diplomatic struggle was seen, not as a crucial but a possible component of military option.

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199 Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), p.37

200 Morris, *op. cit.* p. 330

201 Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, (University of California Press, 1990), p. 155

202 *Ibid.* pp 144-145

203 Rabinovich, *the View from Damascus*, p. 180

Syria rejected Israel's offer voted by the Knesset on June 19, 1967, to return the Golan to Syria, albeit demilitarized, in exchange for a peace agreement.<sup>204</sup> While other Arabs delivering their public response to Israel's offer at a summit conference of Arab states held in Khartoum, in September 1967, where they articulated their position as three no's; no negotiation, no peace, and no recognition,<sup>205</sup> Syria, even boycotted the Summit in an all-out rejection to negotiate with Israel.<sup>206</sup> In turn, Israel's position eroded towards the end of 1967<sup>207</sup> and it started to establish settlements on the Golan Heights.<sup>208</sup>

The UNSCR 242 adopted shortly after the war, embodied land for peace principle, was sufficiently ambiguous to allow the Arab states and Israel to read in it what they wanted.<sup>209</sup> It was also initially rejected and formally accepted only in 1968 by Syria. Rabinovich says that, in reality, Syria did not object to a diplomatic solution as such, in case the peace for land approach might work.<sup>210</sup>

On February 24, 1969, Israeli air force planes attacked two guerilla camps inside Syria and shot two Syrian planes down. The ensuing confrontation paved the way for Asad's positioning himself as the real man behind the scenes, however he refrained from ousting Jadid in order to guarantee a smooth transition of power for maintaining a least semblance of continuity of Ba'th party rule.

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204 It indicated Israeli withdrawal from the captured territories on the basis of the international boundary, 204 in exchange of the demilitarization of the Golan, and an ironclad guarantee of Syrian noninterference with the flow of water from the sources of the Jordan to Israel, whether by means of a border adjustment or through an agreement. Shalev, p. 53

205 Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus*, p. 103

206 Barnett *ibid.*

207 Shalev, *op. cit.* p. 54

208 Morris, *ibid.* p. 332

209 Israel claimed that the territories that it had to withdraw were not all but the last territories that it invaded, by this mean it emphasized its wish for a change in international borderline, whereas Arab states defended a total withdrawal. Rabin, *op. cit.* p. 20

210 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, pp. 179-180

Finally the rift became apparent in September 1970 when as Defense Minister, Asad had decided against sending the air force to protect the Syrian army units in the Jordanian civil war. This decision was a highly calculated strategic move on the part of Asad, who knew that if Syria went far enough, Israel would intervene and defeat Syria.<sup>211</sup> This was the signal of the departure of Syrian foreign policy under Asad.

In overall conclusion, the years between 1946 and 1970, witnessed a constant internal, regional and international struggle over Syria. Until the seizure of the Ba'th party in 1963, Syria's foreign policy was characterized by its continuous search for foreign allies. Therefore, although the rise of Ba'th party was in many respects an outcome of the nationalist uproar stimulated by the creation of Israel, in this period, domestic instability and power relations among the Arabs, were more weighty determinants of foreign policy than the struggle with Israel. That is to say, Syria's policy towards Israel was conducted mostly by taking the inter-Arab and domestic dynamics into consideration.

Between 1946 and 1954, the relations between Syria and Israel fluctuated between pragmatism and power plays: at times a policy of force determined border relations and at times confrontation was avoided, direct negotiations were conducted and agreement was reached on certain arrangements. After 1954 Syria owing to changes in domestic, regional and international environments, increasingly adopted a more resolute and radical foreign policy. The Ba'th coups signified the victory of territorial nationalism over pan-Arabism, hence giving Syria more freehand in its external affairs. Therefore during the Ba'th rule, Israel placed itself into its vital position in Syrian foreign policy configuration. Under the Ba'th Syria determined its definite regional and international position, as well as stabilizing Syria's attitude towards Israel. 1966 coup consolidated the shift

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211 Rabil, op. cit. p. 21



towards radicalism, espousing more militant position towards Israel.<sup>212</sup> However the Ba'thi foreign policy towards Israel was not without dilemmas.

The Ba'thi revisionism created a dichotomy between the radicalism of the rhetoric and the actual foreign policy behavior. In order to fulfill this gap, the Ba'th regime applied various unsuccessful approaches such as popular liberation war, stirring up Egypt's support, acquiring weapons from the USSR. All these actions served only to bring the 1967 defeat. The 1967 defeat represented a major turning point for Syrian foreign policy. It replaced pan-Arabism with pan-Syrianism and national interest, and discredited ideological, adventuresome policies and favored pragmatic policies. However this shift in Syrian foreign policy only became obvious with Asad's raising his stakes in power. Syrian approach adopted during the Jordanian civil war contrasted sharply with the unwavering belligerence Syria adopted during 1967.

The period between 1946 and 1970 created certain continuities for the future course of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel. First, the period until 1954 indicates that when the Syrian leaders were likely to see Israel within the sphere of power politics rather than ideological terms, they succeeded in preventing the escalation of the conflict. The factors that led them to adopt pragmatic policies were: aiming to overcome instability at home, gaining security as well as more independency and important role in regional politics, or overcoming external isolation as well as aiming at close relations with the West powers in need of their aid. The peace offers of Za'im and Shishakli are illustrations of this case. This trend paved the way for the emergence of one fact in Syrian dealings with Israel: importance of 'process' over 'agreement'. Negotiations between Syria and Israel, despite not leading to an 'agreement', through the 'process' enabled the sides to reduce the tension without forcing the leadership of both sides to pay any political prices. As this kind of interaction would be iterated, they would put Syria and

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212 Maoz, Mor, op. cit. p. 185

Israel relations into a distinct category in the future; not one between friends, but not one between foes, either.

Second, following the armistice agreement Syria established a habit in its interaction with Israel: giving no military reaction. Even at the highest points of tension that Syria itself provoked either by its rhetoric or military offenses, when it faced reaction from Israel, chose to keep silent and slow down its radical stance. This was a strategy that Syria established after the 1948 war. On the one hand there was the deep animosity towards Israel to the point of refusal to recognize the legitimacy of its existence, on the other hand, the Syrian regimes 'succeeded' in keeping the conflict at sufficiently as to prevent the creation of internal or external pressures that would turn a solution into an acute need.<sup>213</sup> Final and related trend was that Syria applied the practice of evoking Israeli scapegoat in case of domestic crisis as demonstrated in the month before the 1967 war.

Consequently the experience of period between 1946 and 1970, Israel was set onto its essential place Syrian foreign policy configuration, as the wars and dialogues with Israel were deeply embedded in Syria' state formation, and paved the way for pragmatism to be established as the main feature of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel.

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213 Eyal Zisser, "Syria and Israel- Between War and Peace" in *Arab-Jewish Relations: From Conflict to Resolution?*, edited by Elie Podeh and Asher Kaufman, (Sussex Academic Press, 2006) p.115

## CHAPTER 4

### SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ISRAEL IN 1970-2000

Upon his assumption of power, Hafez Asad reaffirmed Syria's rejection of Israel's legitimacy<sup>214</sup>, and concentrated on preparing for war.<sup>215</sup> His priority in state affairs was the struggle against Israel. He looked at Egypt as the only credible ally,<sup>216</sup> while forging new alliances with the conservative Arab oil states and strengthening ties with the USSR to secure financing of Syria's military build-up.<sup>217</sup> Asad saw diplomacy as an indispensable tool in the struggle against Israel if only conducted from a position of strength combined with military power.<sup>218</sup> Syria's determination to advocate the use of continued military and political efforts to force Israel to withdraw from the territories captured in 1967, consequently led it to confront the question of how to separate the "problem of 1967" (The Golan Heights) from the "problem of 1948" (Palestine), namely how to regain the territories lost in 1967 without offering recognition of Israel's legitimate existence within its pre-1967 borders. As an answer Asad for the first time in March 1972 conditionally accepted UNSCR 242, provided it guarantee total Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab territories and Palestinian rights. However the priority was given to the former.<sup>219</sup>

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214 Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, (University of California Press, 1990), p. 185

215 Robert Rabil, *Embattled Neighbors Syria, Israel, and Lebanon* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), pp. 21-22

216 Ibid.

217 Moshe Ma'oz, *Syria And Israel From War To Peace Making*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 260

218 Seale, *ibid.* 185

219 Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth-Century Syria*, (Valentine Mitchell, 2008), pp. 180-181

However in addition to not responding to Asad's terms, Israel inflicted heavy casualties on the Syrian army between November 1972 and January 1973 following the fedayeen attacks.<sup>220</sup> Hence Asad assessed that he was left with no option but to resort to military action. The attack was decided on in a meeting with Sadat and was handed down to the military. It appeared that little or no strategic planning preceded Asad's decision to join the war, reflecting the degree of autonomy in his foreign policy making.<sup>221</sup>

On October 6 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack. For the first time since 1948 Arab armies had succeeded in surprising the Israeli forces. During the first days, Israel seemed on the verge of defeat.<sup>222</sup> Asad's conduct of the war revealed the scaled down goals of Syria in its foreign policy towards Israel. Asad had a purely military objective of applying his limited war strategy to capture of the entire Golan (and Sinai) and perform subsequent pressure on Israel to give up the occupied Palestinian territories,<sup>223</sup> rather than carrying grand expansionist ambitions. Thus Syrian forces attacking into the Golan made no attempt, where they had the opportunity of advancing into Israel.<sup>224</sup> However within 4 days which exposed the differences between Sadat's and Asad's war aims, the Israeli forces pushed the Syrian troops back from the Golan and advanced some 25 miles south of Damascus.<sup>225</sup> At that time while the USSR called for a ceasefire, the US held the enforcement of the UNSCR 338 up until Israel got back its losses in October 22, 1973.<sup>226</sup> Whereas Israel and Egypt, that

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220 Moshe Ma'oz, *Asad: The Sphinx of Damascus*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), p.87

221 Shmuel Bar, "Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview", Institute for Policy and Strategy Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel, 2006, pp. 354-355

222 Rabil, op. cit., p. 23

223 Ibid. p. 24

224 Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Foreign Policy Of Syria", in Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami *The Foreign Policies Of The Middle Eastern States*, (Boulder, Colo. : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p.152

225 Zeev Maoz, Ben D. Mor, *Bound by Struggle: The Strategic Evolution of Enduring International Rivalries*, (University of Michigan Press, 2002, p. 190

226 Rabil, ibid. p. 24

reached a cease-fire on October 16 excluding Asad, accepted the resolution, Syria only on October 23 reluctantly accepted it spelling out the same understanding that applies to the UNSCR 242.<sup>227</sup> Nonetheless as Drysdale and Hinnebusch indicate, by accepting the resolutions, Syria, for the first time, explicitly accepted Israel's right to exist within secure borders.<sup>228</sup>

Despite its military victory Israel emerged from the war deeply shaken: its defense strategy and the deterrence doctrine collapsed; the territorial depth on account of the Golan did not prevent the outbreak of the war, and evacuating the Israeli settlements in the Golan proved them as a liability rather than an asset to defense.<sup>229</sup> Syria on the other hand, won its self confidence back as the war showed that Arabs could fight. In addition, the alliance with Egypt for the first time enabled Syria to reach the position of a shared regional hegemony.<sup>230</sup> Moreover the October War, as the first action of Asad's dynamic and courageous foreign policy, given the ineffectiveness of both of its allies- Egypt and the USSR, brought him high prestige in the Arab world as the new leader of the Arab struggle against Israel<sup>231</sup>, as well as helping him to consolidate his regime,<sup>232</sup> increasing his freedom in conducting foreign policy.

In the aftermath of the war the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, embarked on a step-by-step strategy aiming at reaching interim political settlements between the parties of the 1973 war. On January 18, 1974 Egypt and Israel signed their first disengagement of forces agreement (Sinai I).<sup>233</sup> Asad

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227 Rabil, *ibid.* p. 25

228 Alasdair Drysdale, Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Middle East Peace Process*, (New York: Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1991), pp. 107-108

229 Ma'oz (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 133

230 *Ibid* p. 261

231 Ma'oz (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 128-130

232 Maoz (1988), *op. cit.* p.75

233 Ma'oz (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 132

initially was determined to keep on fighting until he reaches his war aims as well as recovers the additional land lost<sup>234</sup>, however, Israel was only ready to withdraw roughly to the pre-1973 war line.<sup>235</sup> Asad soon made a tactical shift in his strategy from limited war to diplomacy<sup>236</sup> in order to exploit the leverage that Syria gained through the recovery of lost Arab dignity to get pressure on Israel,<sup>237</sup> which he couldn't drive out of the occupied territories even by a two-front, well-prepared, surprise assault.<sup>238</sup> Hence, Syria embarked on a diplomatic attempt that would last until Camp David, under American auspices, which he saw as the only effective weight over Israel.<sup>239</sup>

Throughout Kissinger's slow and difficult shuttle, between March and May 1974, Asad initiated a war of attrition along the new cease-fire line to supply Syria with an extra bargaining card<sup>240</sup>, which also targeted at demonstrating to Syrians and to the Arabs at large that Syria alone continued to struggle.<sup>241</sup> During the negotiations, Syria endeavored to recover its newly occupied territory and to have a symbolic gain of land captured in 1967 to safeguard the legitimacy of the regime, to rationalize domestically the negotiations and to justify the October War itself.<sup>242</sup> On May 31, 1974, Syria and Israel reached a disengagement whereby Syria turned its defeat into a victory through diplomacy,<sup>243</sup> regaining its salient

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234 Maoz (1988), p.87

235 Ma'oz (1995), op. cit., p. 132

236 Hinnebusch, op. cit. p. 154

237 Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 149

238 Drysdale, Hinnebusch, op. cit., pp. 107-108

239 Ma'oz (1995), op.cit., pp. 146-147

240 Hinnebusch, *ibid.*

241 Maoz (1995), p. 94

242 Rabil, op. cit., p. 26

243 *Ibid.*

occupied during the 1973 war as well as Quneitra, a town captured by Israel in 1967. Rabinovich states that the reason behind Asad's success was his -fighting while talking- strategy created anxiety for both Israel and the US about a renewed war.<sup>244</sup> Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement became a watershed marking the beginning of a period of tranquility along the disengagement line on the Golan and a period of active Syrian partnership in the US-brokered peace process.

Asad publicly offered peace deals to Israel in 1975, 1976 and 1977<sup>245</sup>, yet they were merely a non-belligerency agreement<sup>246</sup>, directed towards Egypt and the US to formulate a joint Egyptian-Syrian diplomacy with American backing. Adversely Egypt and Syria signed the Sinai II in September 1975, which removed Egypt from the military equation, diminishing pressure on Israel to deal with Syria.<sup>247</sup> At this juncture Asad criticized Sadat's action as a breach in Arab solidarity, but did not burn the bridges totally and at the same time started to invest for alternative strategies that rested on Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinians in order to enhance his regional posture<sup>248</sup> to give Syria extra cards in the diplomatic maneuvering of the late 1970s.<sup>249</sup> However Egypt and Israel signed Camp David Accords in September 1978, which led to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of March 1979. As his diplomatic strategy collapsed<sup>250</sup>, Asad focused especially on Lebanon, the only substantial achievement among his alternative strategies, although not without great difficulties.

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244 Rabinovich op. cit. p.272

245 Rabinovich *ibid.* p 237

246 Moshe Ma'oz, 'Syria, Israel and the Peace Process' in Barry Rubin, Joseph Ginat, Moshe Ma'oz (ed.), *From War to Peace: Arab-Israeli Relations 1973-1993*, (New York: New York Uni. Press, 1994), pp. 159

160, Drysdale, Hinnebusch, op. cit., 145

247 Ma'oz (1995), op.cit., pp. 146-147

248 Seale, op. cit. p.252

249 Hinnebusch, *Revolution from Above*, p. 149

250 Ma'oz (1995), op.cit., p. 152

Lebanon was a highly important component in the Syrian confrontation with Israel. Beqaa valley was a natural invasion way for the Israeli army towards Damascus, whereas southern Lebanon a place for Syrian military or Syrian-sponsored guerilla operations against northern Israel.<sup>251</sup> Furthermore, given the PLO presence there, Lebanon was the key to Asad's control of the "Palestinian card:" enhancing Syria's bargaining leverage vis-à-vis Israel by holding the capacity to veto any settlement of the Palestinian problem. In the wake of Sinai II, a potential Syrian control over Lebanon could strengthen Syria's regional position and help prevent legitimization of the Camp David accords.<sup>252</sup> Asad was committed to implement Faisal's unsuccessful scheme of Greater Syria (1918-20).<sup>253</sup> In reality for these pragmatic purposes the concept of Greater Syria was found extremely useful since, it provides Syria with a claim to special relationship with Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.<sup>254</sup> That is to say it was the reflection of Asad's strategic security needs rather than his ideological convictions about Greater Syria.<sup>255</sup> Asad viewed Lebanon as the most precious investment for its policy towards Israel.<sup>256</sup>

At a time that Syria ventured to build its power base against the Israeli attempts of establishing its foothold,<sup>257</sup> a clash between pro-Israeli Phalangist militias and pro-Syrian Palestinian commandos on April 13, 1975 in Beirut developed into the Lebanese civil war. Initially Damascus refrained from the direct military intervention to not antagonize the US sponsored ongoing peace

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251 Ma'oz ibid. p. 161

252 Heller, Peter B. "The Syrian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War," Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies 4, No. 1 (Fall 1980), p.60

253 Rabinovich, op. cit. p.175

254 Ibid. p. 183

255 Rabil, op. cit., p. 51

256 Rabinovich ibid. p. 247

257 Rabil, op. cit., p. 43



process.<sup>258</sup> When the last marks of communal coexistence erased, Asad decided to intervene<sup>259</sup> assessing that the partition of Lebanon would give the pretext for an Israeli intervention, increasing Syria's vulnerability, in the absence of Egypt.<sup>260</sup>

Syrians fought alongside the Muslims and the Palestinians<sup>261</sup>, until in February 1976 Muslims went on the offensive on the Maronites. Asad sought to prevent a Muslim-Palestinian victory<sup>262</sup> because emergence of a “rejectionist” Lebanon, sponsoring guerrilla war against Israel, would give the latter an excuse to evade peace pressures, constraining Syria’s diplomacy, as well as eroding Asad's Palestinian card and bring in Israel’s intervention on behalf of the Maronites<sup>263</sup> and coerce Syria into war it didn’t seek. Syrian intervention in Lebanon to adjust the military balance appealed to the US to prevent another war in the region<sup>264</sup> Through US mediation Syria and Israel reached an oral understanding-“Red Line Agreement”<sup>265</sup> depicting the red lines Israel expected Syria to observe in return for tolerating its intervention. On June 1, 1976, Asad dispatched regular forces in various parts of Lebanon on behalf of the Maronites.<sup>266</sup> The intervention signaled Syria's ability to continue to maneuver

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258 Ma’oz (1995), op. cit., p. 164

259 Yair Evron, War and Intervention in Lebanon: The Israeli-Syrian Deterrence Dialogue, (Routledge, 1987), pp. 20-22

260 Adeed Dawisha, Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair, (Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 72-74

261 Rabil, op. cit., pp. 50-51

262 Itamar Rabinovich, The War for Lebanon: 1970-1985, (Cornell University Press 1984), p.48

263 Ma’oz (1995), op. cit., pp. 164-165

264 Seale op. cit. p.276

265 Key elements of the agreement were: 1) the Syrian army would not enter southern Lebanon 2) the Syrian army in Lebanon would not be equipped with surface to air missile batteries 3) the Syrian army would not use its air force against the Christians in Lebanon., Rabil, op. cit., p. 52

266 Evron, op cit. p. 13

successfully in the regional system<sup>267</sup> and led it emerge as the pivotal actor.<sup>268</sup> Soon however as Syria realigned with the Palestinians against Sadat's initiative<sup>269</sup> and kept its army following the (interim) end of the civil war, Israel decided to not tolerate the Syrian presence.<sup>270</sup>

In mid-March 1978, in reaction to a Palestinian terrorist attack, the Israeli army carried out the Litani Operation against the PLO. As its excessive reprisal, Israel forcibly withdrew from the south of Lebanon by establishing a buffer zone.<sup>271</sup> Following this, Egypt signed the Camp David accords with Israel.<sup>272</sup> Domestically Asad regime had been passing through the most unfortunate period of its history: reduce of the petro-dollar flow due to Syria's assault on Palestinians in Lebanon dragged Syria into an economic crisis,<sup>273</sup> which in turn formed a fitting backdrop for the outbreak of the Muslim Brotherhood's revolt.<sup>274</sup> However domestic factors do not explain Syrian passivity during the Litani Operation. Asad, knowing that some 30.000 troops that Syria had in Lebanon which already was clashing fiercely with Christian militias armed by Israel, were in no shape to cope with the invader, was concerned that the operation was the prelude to an attack on Syria itself and continued his policy of avoiding direct confrontation

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267 Ibid, p.50

268 Dawisha, op. cit. pp. 185-187

269 Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon: 1970-1985*, p.53

270 Ma'oz (1995), op. cit., p. 168

271 Rabil, op. cit., , pp.58-59

272 Eyal Zisser, "Syria and Israel- Between War and Peace" in *Arab-Jewish Relations: From Conflict to Resolution?*, edited by Elie Podeh and Asher Kaufman, (Sussex Academic Press, 2006), p. 121

273 Seale, op. cit. p. 320

274 Rabil, op. cit., , pp. 61-62

with Israel.<sup>275</sup> The Litani Operation became a reminder of the Israeli leverage over Syria in Lebanon.<sup>276</sup>

At this juncture Asad welcomed the change that Iranian Revolution in 1979 made in regional power balance as a natural counterweight at a time when Egypt was lost to an Israel.<sup>277</sup> Besides good relations with Iran could provide the support of Lebanon's Shites<sup>278</sup> in the coming duel with Begin's more activist Israel.<sup>279</sup> Asad, in order to justify his alliance with a non-Arab state, and his support to it in the Iran-Iraq war, emphasized on the anti-Zionism of Iran, thus explained the alliance as being in 'the best interests of the Arab struggle against Israel.'<sup>280</sup>

In March, 1981 continuous provocations of the Maronites under the rising leadership of Bashir Gemayel as part of their deal with Israel, led to skirmishes between Syria and Israel in Zahle<sup>281</sup> Israel was in an effort to install Gemayel as Lebanon's president that required an all-out Israeli invasion of Lebanon and confrontation with Syria. On June 3, 1982, Palestinian extremists' shooting Israel's ambassador to Britain led Israel to launch its attack on Lebanon. On June 6 1982, Israel launched "Operation Peace for Galilee" by the US's green light. This was an effect of transition from Carter to Reagan administration, namely the revival of Cold War thinking to see Syria little more than a Soviet proxy. Again the Israeli threat was mounting at a time when Muslim Brotherhood insurrection augmented, however again Asad would respond to the change in Israel's policy,

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275 Seale, op. cit. p. 312

276 Ibid.

277 Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, (I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 21

278 Yosef Olmert, "Iranian-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik", in David Menashri (ed.), (1990), pp. 172-173

279 Ibid. p. 353-364

280 Ibid. p.176

281 Rabil, op. cit., p. 63

rather than to the domestic pressures.<sup>282</sup> Asad ordered his troops to refrain from direct confrontation with Israel and simultaneously moved reinforcements to the Beqaa valley to defend its position there.<sup>283</sup> In a few days, the IDF swept through Lebanon, attacked Syrian forces in Beqaa, going beyond its declared goal of pushing back the PLO 40 km from the Israeli frontier.<sup>284</sup> The fighting resulted by mid- August 1982 in an Israeli victory.<sup>285</sup> On August 23 Bashir Gemayel was elected as the Lebanese president and Lebanon practically became Israel's satellite, while Israeli troops were stationed some 25 miles west of Damascus.<sup>286</sup>

The 1982 war was Asad's bitterest war. He faced the war alone while Israel put all its energy into a one-front campaign. Asad was facing isolation in the Arab world because of his failure to pacify Lebanon and to defend the Palestinian existence.<sup>287</sup> Only Iran actively supported Syria with financial aid and manpower.<sup>288</sup> In the war's aftermath Syria sought to first to protect its diminished assets, than to re-establish itself in Lebanon and finally to cancel the advantages Israel had gained.<sup>289</sup> For this end Asad devised a two-pronged, "sword and shield" strategy. 1982 defeat taught Asad the ineffectiveness of conventional war due to clear Israeli deterrence. Thus the use of the unconventional warfare as an offensive instrument served as Syria's 'sword' which was highly dependent on Iran due to its Shi'ite proxies in Lebanon.<sup>290</sup> Supporting organizations whose activities are more or less in line with Syrian objectives would prevent Syria from an

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282 Maoz, Mor. op. cit. p. 195

283 Evron, op. cit. pp.135-136

284 Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon: 1970-1985*, p.122

285 Maoz, (1988), p.166

286 Ma'oz (1995), op. cit., pp. 175-177

287 Maoz, (1988), p. 166

288 Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran, Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.90

289 Evron, p. 168

290 Goodarzi, op. cit., p.95

embroilment in a military confrontation with Israel, so that Syria could not be clearly identified as the “address”.<sup>291</sup>

The shield was Asad's strategic parity policy, mostly depending on the USSR's military supply. The doctrine of strategic parity was designed to close the qualitative gap between Syria and Israel revealed by the 1982 war in the political, socio-economic and cultural terms in order to; deter Israel from attacking Syria; enable Syria to resist an Israeli attack and allow an attack on Israel by itself; negotiate from a position of strength; enhance Syria's regional position; and eventually change the status quo to its own liking.<sup>292</sup>

On September 14, 1982 Bashir Gemayel was assassinated apparently by a Syrian agent. The next day, IDF entered West Beirut and allowed the Lebanese Forces to enter the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla to sweep out the PLO guerillas, which brought about the withdrawal of the army from Beirut. These contributed to the undermining of Israel's strategic position in Lebanon. In the May 17 1983 Lebanon and Israel terminated the state of war between them, requiring Israeli withdrawal from the whole Lebanon.<sup>293</sup> Syria denounced their agreement as a continuation of the Camp David process and Syria worked to undo it.<sup>294</sup> From April to September 1983, the pro-Iranian Lebanese Shi'ite militant organization Hezbollah committed, a series of suicide assault against Israeli, American and French targets.<sup>295</sup> Consequently, in February 1984, while the Americans and French pulled their units out of Beirut, Amin Gemayel abrogated

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291 Michael Eisenstadt, *Arming for Peace?: Syria's Elusive Quest for Strategic Parity*, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992), pp.33-35

292 Maoz (1995), p. 265

293 Rabil, op. cit., pp. 72

294 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 247

295 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997), op.cit. p.90

the agreement and Israel unilaterally withdrew leaving a six-mile wide security belt along the border.<sup>296</sup>

Hinnebusch and Ehteshami argue that the dramatic effectiveness of the Iranian sponsored proxy warfare taught Israel the cost of interventionism and proved Asad the strategic value of Iranian alliance.<sup>297</sup> Within 3 years after 1982 war, despite its regional isolation and internal problems, Syria succeeded in confronting the challenge which Israel played before it, as well as hindering the US policies in the Middle East.<sup>298</sup> In 1985 Asad prevented, just like Lebanon, Jordan and the PLO's bid for negotiations with Israel under Reagan plan. Asad's policy of tactical rejectionism demonstrated that if Syria could not achieve a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace to its liking, it could prevent others' separate deals that damaged Syria's interests.<sup>299</sup>

Syria faced a challenge to its comfort in Lebanon as Michel Aoun, the would-be President of Lebanon announced a liberation war against Syria in March 1989. In view of the constitutional impasse, Lebanese deputies gathered in the city of Taif in Saudi Arabia and amended the constitution, became known as the *Taif Accord*.<sup>300</sup> Following the Ta'if conference, Syria appointed a pro-Syrian president Elias Hrawi and focused its efforts at defeating Aoun's revolt.<sup>301</sup> This opportunity arrived when the US had yielded to Asad's demand for total hegemony over Lebanon as a price for bringing Syria into the anti-Iraq coalition in the Gulf crisis.<sup>302</sup> The removal of Aoun allowed Asad to reorder the political geography of

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296 Maoz, (1995) p.177

297 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, ibid pp. 88-95

298 Goodarzi, op. cit. p 59

299 Rabinovich, The View from Damascus, p. 250

300 Rabil, op. cit., pp. 78-79

301 R. Avi -Ran, The Syrian Involvement in Lebanon Since 1975, (Westview Press, 1991), p.220

302 Rabil, op. cit., pp. 78-79

Lebanon.<sup>303</sup> The emergence of a new Lebanon under Syrian hegemony expedited the implementation of the Taif Accord that provided methodically 'syrianization' of the country through a series of bilateral agreements<sup>304</sup>; militarily, politically and legally, making Lebanon a prisoner of Syria's agenda in its interactions with Israel.<sup>305</sup>

Along with the success in Lebanon, by the mid-1980s, it seemed that the Syrian army achieved a balance with the Israeli army in terms of quantity, if not quality that contributed to deter Israel to attack Syria and enabled Asad to negotiate from position of strength.<sup>306</sup> However Asad's sense of complacency was short lived.<sup>307</sup> Allocation of substantial resources for the doctrine of strategic parity brought in the economic recession in 1983-1984, and political problems. Rather than the internal challenges, the foreign policy of Syria responded to the external environment.<sup>308</sup> Since Mikhail Gorbachev's coming to power in 1985, Soviet policy toward Syria had undergone a major shift,<sup>309</sup> political and military support ceased<sup>310</sup>, thus increased Syria's vulnerability and declined Syria's ability to exploit the bipolar world.<sup>311</sup> Regionally Syria faced isolation due to its support for the Iranians during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>312</sup> As the war terminated, Iraq forced

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303 Avi –Ran, *ibid.* pp.221-222

304 Volker Perthes, "Syrian Predominance in Lebanon: Not Immutable," in Hollis and Shehadi, *Lebanon on Hold : Implications for Middle East Peace*, (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996), p.32

305 Ma'oz (1995), pp. 79-80

306 Ma'oz, (1988), p. 98

307 Rabinovich, *op. cit.* pp. 277-78

308 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997), *op.cit.* p. 79

309 Drysdale, Hinnebusch, *op. cit.* p. 149

310 John Hannah, *At Arms Length: Soviet-Syrian Relations in the Gorbachev Era*, (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1989), s . 7-10

311 Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy Syria in Transition*, (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2001), pp. 44-45

312 Hinnebusch, *op. cit.* 155

Syria into more isolation<sup>313</sup> and attempted to challenge Syria's regional position.<sup>314</sup> In addition the Intifada in 1987 and rising posture of the PLO created difficulty for Asad, thinking that Arafat would go to a separate deal with Israel which in the absence of the Soviet patron, Asad could not obstruct.<sup>315</sup> As a result Syria sought to come to terms with the challenges presented to it.<sup>316</sup> By 1988, Asad's strategy adapted to a 'balance of interests' policy.<sup>317</sup> On the one hand Syria continued to build a credible military power and sustain its alliance with Iran; as well as to maintain its control in Lebanon and reassert its influence in Jordan and among the Palestinians. On the other hand Syria approached Egypt and Saudi Arabia as well as the US in order to integrate with a pragmatic inter-Arab alliance to gain American diplomatic and financial support and to join the Arab-Israeli peace process.

In 1989 Egyptian-Syrian diplomatic relations was restored.<sup>318</sup> Considering Syria's position to isolate Egypt in the Arab world as long as the latter adhered to peace with Israel, Syria's abandonment of this policy was significant.<sup>319</sup> In addition Syria sent many messages to the US, that it was ready for a peace.<sup>320</sup> Asad needed to get the US to accept Syria as the key to peace and stability in the Middle East<sup>321</sup>, however, there were limits to such a rapprochement as Damascus

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313 Zisser, op.cit., p. 53

314 Fred Halliday, "The Middle East, the Great Powers, and the Cold War" in Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim (ed.), *The Cold War and the Middle East*, (New York: Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 74

315 Rabinovich, op. cit. p. 238

316 Eberhard Kienle, "Syria, the Kuwait War, and the New World Order" in Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael (ed.), *The Gulf War and the New World Order*, International Relations of the Middle East, (Uni.Press of Florida, 1994), pp. 384-385

317 Maoz, Mor. , op.cit. p. 197

318 Maoz, (1995), p. 258

319 Rabinovich, p. 238

320 Ibid, p. 239

321 Hinnebusch (2002), op.cit., p. 158



remained in the US list of states sponsoring international terrorism. The Gulf crisis presented the opportunity for Syria to play the new game through American acknowledgement of its interests.<sup>322</sup> Also Asad was afraid that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait could unleash a wider war which Israel could exploit to attack Syria, and joining the coalition was a kind of insurance against that.<sup>323</sup>

The Syrian regime justified its joining the coalition selling that Iraq's conquest of Kuwait had strengthened Israel's hand with an improved international position. Zisser argued that eventually Syrian public opinion perceived the measures adopted by the regime as unavoidable under the prevailing regional and international circumstances. After the crisis ended, the Syrian public came to appreciate the benefits to Syria afforded by this policy.<sup>324</sup> These justifications that enhanced the coalition's legitimacy within the Arab world, along with Syria's position during the Gulf crisis, brought about a significant improvement in relations with Washington.<sup>325</sup> In order to implement its new peace plan, the George W. Bush Administration needed Syria's support and cooperation.<sup>326</sup> After being outside the regional framework throughout the 1980s, Syria was able to reintegrate itself into the regional mainstream. The Gulf crisis also provided Syria with an opportunity to compensate for the loss of the economic support of the Soviet Union through the Gulf Arab states.<sup>327</sup> Alongside all these benefits, the Syrians became aware of the position of the US as the world's sole superpower and Asad understood that he could not realize his goals in opposition to the remaining superpower and Syria's struggle with Israel had to take a chiefly

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322 Eberhard Kienle, "Syria, the Kuwait War, and the New World Order" in Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael (ed.), *The Gulf War and the New World Order, International Relations of the Middle East*, (Uni.Press of Florida, 1994), pp. 384-385

323 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997), *op.cit.* pp. 80-81

324 Zisser, *op.cit.*, pp. 57-62

325 *Ibid.*

326 Kienle, *op.cit.*, p. 386

327 Neil Quilliam, *Syria and the New World Order*, (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1999), p. 162

diplomatic form and that required détente with the United States, which alone had leverage over Israel.<sup>328</sup> As a result Asad made a strategic decision of making a contractual peace with Israel,<sup>329</sup> as a continuation of the double strategy that Asad had initiated following his rise to power, the simultaneous usage of military and diplomacy.<sup>330</sup>

On October 30, 1991, based on Bush's determination to achieve a comprehensive peace in the Middle East following the victory against Iraq, the Middle East Peace Conference opened in Madrid under the co-sponsorship of the US and USSR. The Madrid Peace Talks built upon two-track peace process- bilateral negotiations between Israel and Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians, and multilateral negotiations. Its framework reflected the re-making of the Middle East within the New World Order, through a new understanding of regional security, with the economic development and environmental aspects. Hafez Asad and Syria had a special role in the peace process: The US wanted Asad's prestige and his regional power resources, i.e. influence over Palestinians, Jordan and Lebanon, to be harnessed to the peace process rather than to be mobilized against it.<sup>331</sup>

During the bilateral negotiations between Syria and Israel began on November 3, 1991, Asad's approach was directed by strategic and tactical considerations and for both sides it was like a war, zero-sum game in which each tried to gain leverage over the other.<sup>332</sup> The Syrians insisted on "land for peace" that for peace, Israel had first to agree to a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Rabinovich comments that this was a bargaining position, once Israel commits itself to withdraw from all occupied territories and concedes the national

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328 Hinnebusch (2002), op.cit., p. 158

329 Maoz, (1995) op. cit. pp.197-202

330 Ibid p. 201

331 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 301

332 Hinnebusch, *Ehteshami*, p. 165

rights of Palestinians, Asad would agree to sign a peace agreement.<sup>333</sup> The Israeli position was derivative from Likud-led Shamir government's 'peace for peace' policy.<sup>334</sup> Also Israelis refused to deal with first the territorial issue but other steps to build confidence concerning security.<sup>335</sup> Therefore in practice peace talks between the two sides began after June 1992, following Labor-led Rabin's taking over the Israeli prime ministry, which reversed Israel's position into 'land for peace.'<sup>336</sup>

By August 31, 1992, the Syrians presented a paper titled "Draft Declaration of Principles" which covered Syria's concept of peace settlement regarding withdrawal, security arrangements, normal peaceful relations, and time table for implementation.<sup>337</sup> The declaration rested on the Syrian interpretation of the UNSCR 242 and 338 and the principle of "land for peace".<sup>338</sup> However, from the Israeli perspective in return for full withdrawal, Syrians was offering only a non-belligerency agreement.<sup>339</sup> In early November 1992 Rabin reached a new formula: "The depth of withdrawal will reflect the depth of peace". Although it was a withdrawal 'on' the Golan, not 'from' the Golan in return for a separate, full peace and normalization with Syria, it implied that full withdrawal was within the realm of the possibility. Syria's response was "total withdrawal for total peace" which had a blurred definition of peace and tied to withdrawal from the entire Golan, southern Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.<sup>340</sup> Syria also insisted on that the peace should be comprehensive,

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333 Ma'oz, *ibid.* pp.167-168

334 Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 40-41

335 Helena Cobban, *The Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks 1991-1996 and Beyond*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), p. 39

336 Rabinovich, *op.cit.*, pp. 54-55

337 Rabinovich, *op.cit.*, pp. 59-61

338 Rabin, *op.cit.*, p. 201

339 Rabin, *op.cit.*, p. 201

340 Rabinovich, *op.cit.*, p. 83

on all Arab fronts, and particularly include the implementation of the Palestinian rights.<sup>341</sup>

Negotiations continued under Clinton administration on April 27, 1993 that gave priority to Syrian-Israeli track,<sup>342</sup> in order to strengthen the dual containment of Iran and Iraq. Thus its alliance with Iran strengthened Syria's hand in the peace talks.<sup>343</sup> Syrians offered "full peace for full withdrawal" which could be limited to the Golan. This meant that Damascus departed from its original position of reaching a comprehensive peace.<sup>344</sup> As Rabin insisted that they would not negotiate the dimensions of the withdrawal before Syrian explanation of peace, Asad again resorted to his old tactic— Hezbollah intensified the tension on the Lebanese-Israeli border.<sup>345</sup> Rabin responded by launching Operation Accountability in July 1993. Two statesmen were observing each other through the prism of power politics while engaged in the negotiations.<sup>346</sup>

On August 3, 1993, Rabin conveyed what came to be known as 'Rabin Deposit'- a hypothetical, conditional willingness to withdraw from the Golan Heights modeled after the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement.<sup>347</sup> The formula included a five-year timetable and a phased implementation in which a heavy dose of normalization would be given by Syria early on in return for a limited first phase of withdrawal. Asad's response was positive in principle, for the first time he agreed to a contractual peace but he wanted to know what Rabin had in mind for withdrawal: was it to the 1923 international boundary or to the line of June 4,

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341 Ma'oz, op.cit., p. 231

342 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 255

343 Ehteshami, *Hinnebush*, p. 191

344 Rabinovich, op.cit., pp. 94-95

345 Ma'oz, op.cit., pp. 234-235

346 Rabin, op.cit., p. 204

347 Rabinovich, op.cit., pp. 104-106

1967, this remained ambiguous. Also Asad refused engaging in public diplomacy and establishing a discreet bilateral channel. He insisted the security arrangements must be equal and he wanted Israeli withdrawal within 6 months. Asad's response indicated that a long period of bargaining process lied ahead. Also it seemed that Syria would insist on full linkage to the Lebanese track, and that Asad needed an unclear measure of progress with the Palestinians in order to legitimize his own move. In other words; Asad was willing to come to an agreement on the basis of his own package of peace or close approximation of it.<sup>348</sup> At this juncture Rabin compared the quiet in the Golan since 1974, to the Intifada, thus shifted his attention to Palestinian track. As a result, the Israeli-Syrian negotiations stalled and soon after the Syrians were shocked by the Oslo accord on August 31, 1993<sup>349</sup>, which gave Israel a considerable tactical advantage, and undermined Asad's peace strategy, while reinforcing his suspicions of Israel's intentions.

When talks restarted in mid-1994, Israel and Syria exchanged draft treaties which in turn opened a discussion over the line. On 18 July 1994, Rabin and Christopher agreed the United States could tell Syria that Israel accepted the 4 June line if all other Israeli conditions were met. Asad at the joint press conference said:

We want the peace of brave, a peace which secures the interests of each side...If the leaders of Israel have sufficient courage to respond to this kind of peace, a new era of security and stability in which normal peaceful among all shall dawn.<sup>350</sup>

According to Rabil, this constituted an important turning point in Asad's approach. Asad was sending Israel a message of his readiness to discuss normalization.<sup>351</sup> Rabinovich argued that Asad's statements were positive but vague. Asad used the term normal, peaceful relations, but he did not refer

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348 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 292

349 Cobban, *op.cit.*, pp. 48-51

350 Rabil, *op.cit.*, p.206

351 Rabil, *op.cit.*, p.206

specifically to Israel but rather spoke of among all in the region, so his insistence on comprehensiveness was a setback.<sup>352</sup> Zisser on the other hand argues that Asad used the term *adiyya* (routine) and not *tabi'yya* (normal). However *adiyya* was translated as “normal”. Apparently then, Asad chose his words carefully when referring to the type of peace he sought with Israel, thus leaving the door wide open to differing interpretations.<sup>353</sup>

In late April 1994, Rabin explained two new points to Secretary of State Christopher. First, he argued that peace had to be implemented in a period of five years. He proposed that the process would start with a limited withdrawal in return of Syrian assurance of normalization and end with a line for final withdrawal to be agreed upon. And a variety of security arrangements had to be implemented, including demilitarization and reduction of troop concentrations – largely on the Syrian side – as well as creating early-warning stations and deploying an international force to supervise the security arrangements.<sup>354</sup>

In Damascus Asad told Christopher that from his point of view full withdrawal from the Golan Heights had to be to the lines of June 4, 1967, and not to the international border of 1923. Asad's time frame remained six months. He could accept some of Israel's general principles for the security arrangements, but continued to insist on “equal footing” and “on both sides”. He had in mind fourteen kilometers of demilitarization and an additional area of limited deployment. He was opposed to early-warning stations in time of peace. Normal peaceful relations were to be implemented in stages. Upon signing the agreement, the state of war would be terminated. Diplomatic relations would be announced earlier but implemented only after a comprehensive settlement was achieved.<sup>355</sup> Rabin did not intend to start bargaining over the specifics of the Syrian response.

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352 Rabinovich, *Brink of Peace* op.cit., pp. 128-130

353 Ibid. p. 219

354 Rabinovich, op.cit., p. 140

355 Rabinovich, op.cit., pp. 143-144

As peace accords were signed with the PLO and Jordan, Syria became more concerned with the Lebanese track. In September 1994 Israel accepted that Syria could be the only ‘reliable guarantor of stability’ on the Lebanese border, and that Syria would remain in Lebanon after an Israeli withdrawal.<sup>356</sup>

In 1995, Israel and Syria achieved a non-paper on “Aims and Principles of Security Arrangements.” The negotiations stalled over an Israeli demand for an early-warning surveillance station on Mount Hermon. Syria rejected this idea at time of peace and saw as violence of Syrian sovereignty. On 4 November 1995, Rabin was assassinated. The negotiations throughout the window of opportunity opened in the Rabin era revolved around Syria’s consistent demand for a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, and Israelis counter-demand for the clarification about the nature of the peace.<sup>357</sup> Asad feared that laying out the nature of the peace, would led the other Arab states think that the peace was inevitable and normalize relations with Israel, destroying what leverage that Syria retained from the perception that it could veto normalization. Moreover as normalization would be difficult to sell at home, Asad did not wish to commit itself to this cost without the certainty of the withdrawal.

Shimon Peres replaced Rabin in November 1995. Peres had taken a number of steps to change the tone of Israeli negotiations with Syria, focusing particularly on the development of economic ties between the two for keeping the peace, i.e., the Golan Heights becoming a free economic zone. Asad’s response was cautiously positive but very guarded. With regard to development projects he emphasized regional development, rather than bilateral cooperation, and expressed preference for development schemes in the Golan. During the resumed talks at Wye Plantation on December 27, 1995, Asad had agreed to accept some normalization before a meaningful Israeli withdrawal. Comprehensiveness, from

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356 William W. Harris, *Faces of Lebanon: Sects, Wars and International Extensions* (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Weiner, 1997), p.313

357 Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace*, p. 76

the Syrian point of view, meant Syria and Lebanon only.<sup>358</sup> From the Syrian point of view, by September 1996, 75 percent of the work of negotiating agreement was completed including other issues like water and security.<sup>359</sup> However, Syria's position on normalization and economic cooperation was discouraging<sup>360</sup>, as a result Peres decided to move to early elections. Asad felt betrayed by this move,<sup>361</sup> as a response Syria gave Hezbollah a free hand to heighten tension in the South Lebanon.<sup>362</sup> Peres, like Rabin, decided to launch an operation, Grapes of Wrath, against Lebanon on April 2, 1996. Peace process stalemated.

Maoz notes that both parties settled dissimilarities and made positive gestures toward each other and by early 1996, became rather close to concluding a peace agreement.<sup>363</sup> On the contrary Zisser argues that both sides failed to overcome a series of differences of opinion, or at least they haven't tried to translate the general understandings into a genuine agreement.<sup>364</sup> Rabinovich evaluates although the discussions ended with a better sense of each other's positions, no breakthrough was achieved because Syria and Israel could not remove the barriers of animosity and distrust, thus failed to close the remaining gaps.<sup>365</sup>

The election of hard-line Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister of Israel on May 29, 1996, carried the negotiations back from "land for peace" to "peace for peace" formula. His insistence that the negotiations be

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358 Rabinovich, *ibid.* p. 208-214

359 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 296

360 Cobban, *op.cit.*, p. 136

361 *Ibid* p. 150

362 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 296

363 Ma'oz, (1995), p. 269

364 Zisser, "Syria and Israel- Between War and Peace", p.124

365 Rabinovich, *ibid.* pp. 291-294



resumed with irrespective of progress made so far and attempts to separate the Lebanese and Syrian tracks from each other frozen the peace process. Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders also resorted to verbal attacks on Syrian leaders. In August 1996 due to these threats, and redeployment of some Syrian troops around Mount Hermon on the Golan and in Lebanon, a mini crisis emerged, which was solved through the US mediation.<sup>366</sup> In addition Netanyahu government set in motion an accelerated program of strengthening Israel's demographic and administrative hold on Golan. Moreover Knesset passed a bill that a referendum must be held before Israeli withdrawal from the Golan which Syria described as a declaration of war. On the contrary Asad claimed that Rabin gave him a 'commitment' to withdraw to June 4 border but Netanyahu concluded that between 1993 and 1996 nothing of a binding nature had been concluded between Syria and Israel.<sup>367</sup> In reaction Syria not only accelerated its proxy war through Hezbollah, also increased and modernized its military arsenal, while fostering its strategic alliance with Iran and expanding its military relations with Russia. Following Netanyahu's defeat in the elections in May 1999, it became known that he had in fact engaged in secret negotiations with Syria in 1998. According to media among other things he agreed that Israel would return to the 1967 lines but the negotiations were halted when he failed to provide a map clearly marked the withdrawal line upon Syrians' request.<sup>368</sup>

Following the election of Labor Party leader Ehud Barak in May 1999, the prospects for Syrian-Israeli peacemaking once again became promising.<sup>369</sup> On December 15, 1999, Israel and Syria resumed talks but due to Asad's insistence on June 4 lines<sup>370</sup> the negotiation was frozen for several weeks.<sup>371</sup> Clinton put a

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366 Ma'oz, (1995), p. 269

367 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 257

368 Zisser, "Syria and Israel- Between War and Peace", p. 124

369 Rabil, *op.cit.*, p. 216

370 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 259

371 *Ibid.* p. 317

final effort in Geneva on March 26, 2000, conveying Barak's readiness in principle to accept the 4 June lines but in turn Barak was demanding changes on the line for Israel to retain sovereignty over the entire northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Barak was demanding an area covering several hundred meters east of the shore, beyond 10 meters that had given the British mandatory government in Palestine control over the sea.<sup>372</sup> Asad refused the offer on the grounds that this shore was in Syrian hands before the 1967 War.<sup>373</sup> The meeting ended yet with another failure, thus marking the end of a decade-long effort to resolve Syrian-Israeli conflict.

Hafez Asad's health had affected the conduct of the negotiations of 1999-2000. He wanted to take back the Golan before stepping offstage, to secure the US will, and to prevent the potential for conflict in Lebanon.<sup>374</sup> In addition he was highly concerned with a smooth succession of power to his son Bashar.<sup>375</sup> Several attempts were made to revive negotiations in the aftermath of Geneva but Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in May and Asad's death in June obstructed the efforts.<sup>376</sup> Many accounts held Asad regime responsible of the failure to reach peace, claiming that Asad had other reasons to negotiate with Israel, taking back the Golan was not his real motivation since there were times that he came so close to regain it, but refrained from signing the deal.

Pipes, prominent follower of this argument, states that Alawite regime in Syria had never any intention to make peace with Israel, because perpetuating the

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372 Ibid p. 332

373 Zisser, *ibid.* p. 125

374 Rabinovich, p. 327

375 Ibid. p.319

376 Ibid. p. 339

conflict gave it legitimacy and kept it in power. Asad conducted negotiations just to increase his standing in the eyes of the US.<sup>377</sup>

Lawson clarifies Syria's motivation to negotiate peace by Syria's dependence on external aid in order to implement the economic programs that generate social support it needs to survive.<sup>378</sup> To overcome the economic recession of mid-1980s, Syrian regime abandoned the established network of state-supported enterprises and looked instead to the private sector to provide employment and tax revenues. By 1991 private interests were in a position to chart the course for the entire Syrian economy with an interest in forming closer ties to the outside world, thus being the motivation behind Syria's softening of its approach towards Israel and joining the US sponsored peace process.<sup>379</sup> Lawson further argues that disaffection over the regime's liberalization program forced Syria make a brake against the peace process, and the regime started to help revitalize Syria's public sector enterprises. As a result state officials adopted a consistently firm stance in the peace talks with Israel.<sup>380</sup>

Hinnebusch on the contrary argues that first of all Syria weathered economic crisis before 1990. Indeed the private sector that Syria was forced to do openings was increasingly co-opted into the regime coalition. At the same time the regime continued to balance all social forces and therefore maintained autonomous of any particular constituency.<sup>381</sup> The economic consequences of peace neither attracted nor repelled the regime sufficiently to be a decisive factor in its policy. Syria's behavior in the negotiations was shaped by what Israel was willing to concede and what Asad believed the power balance would allow him to

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377 Daniel Pipes, *Damascus Courts the West: Syrian Politics, 1989-1991*, (Washington D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1991), pp. 6-7

378 Eberhard Kienle, *Contemporary Syria: Liberalization Between Cold War And Cold Peace*, (British Academic Press, 1994) ,p. 139

379 Ibid. p. 151

380 Ibid 139-140

381 Ehteshami, Hinnebusch pp. 78-79

achieve.<sup>382</sup> Hinnebusch rather explains Asad's cautious position in the peace talks, based on his cost-benefit analysis. Accordingly, benefits of making peace with Israel were: recovery of the Golan, access to Golan water, the security gain, and greater access to the Western-dominated world market, greater private capital investment and possibly an international aid package. However there were heavy costs: the sort of settlement shaping up threatened to leave the Palestinians and Jordan to an Israeli sphere of influence, depriving Syria of its regional role. The alliance with Iran and hegemony in Lebanon might be put at risk. Considering the cost-benefit analysis, Hinnebusch concludes that Asad's continuation to the negotiations in these circumstances is an indicator that he sincerely bowed to reality and accepted a major scaling down of his view of Syria's strategic interests and peace with Israel for the Golan.<sup>383</sup>

Rabinovich admits that Syria aimed to secure US will but Asad was aware that this process would lead him to conclude peace. In order for Asad to help his regime absorb the shock waves and the impact of the changes entailed in his strategic decision to make peace Israel, procedures leading to it had to be defined in a particular way. Dignity, as well as the geopolitical rivalry and Syrian society's and political system's vulnerability to the impact of the opening and to Israel specifically-were important calculations.<sup>384</sup> In addition Rabinovich specifies that for Asad Israel was not only a traditional enemy, the invader on the Golan but a geopolitical rival in the same part of the Middle East.<sup>385</sup>

Zisser expresses that although Syria had achieved substantial autonomy of domestic constraints on his foreign policy, Asad is attentive to the consensus--both within Syria and in the Arab world at large--and he tried as best he can to operate according to it. That is why he warned Arafat in 1993, saying that Arafat

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382 Hinnebusch, *Revolution from Above*, p. 157

383 Ibid. p.173

384 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 293

385 Ibid. p.272

must know that a leader who is not attentive to the feelings of his people might find himself in conflict with them and may even be murdered by his would-be supporters. His carefully choosing words when referring to the type of peace he sought with Israel, thus leaving the door wide open to differing interpretations reflected the same fact.<sup>386</sup>

According to Melhem, Asad was the only Arab leader who negotiated with Israel not solely on a bilateral basis but as a regional player. He had been stubborn in his defense of Syria's interests, not only to get back all of the Golan, but also to preserve for Syria a regional role in the post-peace Middle East that would make it possible for the Syrians not to live constantly in the shadow of Israeli power.<sup>387</sup>

Kessler states that Asad's caution, eclectic tactics and shifting alliances are the moves of a defensive player, not an ideology with grand leadership ambitions. He has never overplayed or overestimated Syria's capabilities or importance. He was unlikely to conclude an agreement that increases Syrian vulnerability just because of he wants to "reverse the disaster of 1967." The return to Syria of the entire Golan Heights, with only a few and minor adjustments in the June 1967 border, is Asad's price for peace; virtually all Syrians are united in this. Acceptance of anything less would be destabilizing to the leadership, if not the country.<sup>388</sup>

Finally Seale points out that for Asad the essence of the settlement was not the recovery of his land but the containment of Israel, just as the notion of comprehensive peace was not about normalization but about holding line against Israel- to

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386 Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace*, p.219

387 Martha Kessler, Helena Cobban, Hisham Melhem, "What About Syria?", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. VII, No. 1, October 1999, p. 109

388 Kessler, Cobban, Melhem, *op.cit* 101-102

make Israel a Middle East player that Arab players could live with -less aggressive and modest.<sup>389</sup>

In sum, Asad was sincere in his aims and he wanted to get Golan back in turn for a peace agreement, but this was not his only aim. He had a wider perspective that he tried to reinforce; placing Syria into the mainstream of the regional power which went along with its struggle with Israel. Hence Asad foresaw this position for Syria at the time of peace, as well.<sup>390</sup>

In overall conclusion, Hafez Asad regime introduced many changes to Syrian foreign policy. Asad replaced most of the foreign policy trends of 1946-1970 period that were heirs of Syria's colonial experience and modified some of them according to the realities of Syrian state. With regard to Israel, he stabilized Syria's policy which used to swing between pragmatism and ideology because of the pressures from domestic, regional and international environments.

This was enabled by Asad's vision of Syria's stand and role vis-à-vis its external environment, as well as Israel's place in this equilibrium, as well as his autonomy in decision making, as illustrated by his the decision to go to war with Israel in 1973 - one of the most challenging decisions made throughout Syrian history, even just after 3 years Asad took the power. Similarly, the Syrian preparations for the peace process with Israel were clearly "top-down"; the president provided the strategic goals and determined what information he needed and the bureaucracy provided the papers.<sup>391</sup>

Asad considered the Middle East as Syria's geopolitical battleground in which he struggled to enhance Syria's strategic position and Israel as the key geopolitical rival of Syria, rather than an ideological enemy. Therefore his motives

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389 Patrick Seale, "Asad's Regional Strategy and the Challenge from Netanyahu", Journal of Palestine Studies, 1996

390 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p .244

391 Bar, op. cit. pp.354-355

did not stem from an ideological foundation; rather pragmatism formed the foundation of his mind and conduct. It is possible to see Asad's leadership in this regard, as a modified continuation of the trend initiated by Husni Zaim and Adip Shishakli. Both saw Israel and the struggle in the Middle East within the sphere of power politics, but unlike them, Asad succeeded to complete the state consolidation. Under Asad, Syria developed into a huge national-security apparatus in which the power was concentrated in Asad's hands in order to confront the gravest threat to the country- Israel, since the country faced defeats and occupation due to the weakness and recklessness of a factionalized regime. The emergence of a comparatively stable and durable regime enabled Syria to pursue a systematic, ambitious and autonomous regional policy, which was the main pillar of Asad's foreign policy towards Israel, rather than being buffeted by the regional forces.<sup>392</sup> At the same time Hafez Asad had never lost sight of the international context within which the struggle for the Middle East was embedded, knowing that Syria could neither fight nor make peace with Israel without superpower involvement. Manipulating regional and international alliances regardless of ideology were primary tools of Asad, as Syria alone lacked the sources to sustain his policy.<sup>393</sup>

With regard to the domestic constraints, autonomous foreign policy making brought an end to domestic and foreign policy linkage. Conversely Lawson claims that Asad continued linking domestic conflicts to foreign policy aggressiveness, for instance the intervention in Lebanon in 1976 aimed at benefiting the Lebanese economy as a way of coping with the internal dissident triggered by the economic crisis.<sup>394</sup>

According to Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, on the contrary, Asad had no record of taking foreign policy decisions for economic reasons which would not

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392 Drysdale, Hinnebusch, op. cit. 147

393 Ibid. p. 149

394 Lawson, op. cit. pp. 94-171

otherwise have been taken on strategic grounds. For instance, although the economy was under pressure in the 1980s, Asad refused to change his policies in Lebanon and his alliance with Iran for the sake of pleasing his aids from the Gulf States.<sup>395</sup>

Similar to Lawson, Pipes asserts that Asad pragmatically exploited anti-Zionism due to his weak domestic base to retain his rule, for example Israeli control of the Golan Heights served Asad by deflecting discontent from him to an external enemy.<sup>396</sup>

Hinnebusch propounds that for Syria, external threats were real and precipitated internal strengthening of the state; this permitted foreign policymakers to achieve sufficient autonomy of domestic constraints to effectively adapt foreign policy to the changing geopolitical power balance. In turn, legitimacy of Asad's regime was largely built on its relative success in doing this. Moreover if Syria's government and public opinion could be said to approach a consensus on any issue, it was over Israel: while rejecting its legitimacy, willing to have a political settlement provided it was an honorable one entailing a comprehensive Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories.<sup>397</sup>

Rabinovich states that Asad's Syria had achieved substantial autonomy of domestic constraints through a patient process of power consolidation, which rendered the foreign policy free of neither to bureaucratic politics nor to the public opinion.<sup>398</sup>

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395 Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran, Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 77-78

396 Pipes, *op. cit.* p. 6-7

397 Hinnebusch, *op. cit.* p.148-149

398 Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p.300



Hinnebusch further expresses that despite his rhetoric, Asad violated pan-Arab norms for Syrian state interests. He even drew a distinction between the Palestinian-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli components of the conflict.<sup>399</sup> But each of his moves could be seen, from his point of view, to have served his wider Arab-nationalist strategy against Israel.<sup>400</sup> Nonetheless Asad knew the fact that he could not reverse one persistent legacy: no Syrian leader could gain credibility in the eyes of the public unless they made a claim to the struggle with Israel. Therefore he used the available pool of national sentiments to mobilize the population or silence them in the service of his pragmatic foreign policy moves.

That is to say as a continuous trend, Syrian foreign policy towards Israel in Hafez Asad era unfolded within a domestic, regional and international context that had a significant impact on its evolution, albeit in a different way: Asad exploited the opportunities posed by three environments, as well as demonstrating a remarkable talent for repositioning Syria more favorably within the political matrix when three levels posed challenges.

Asad's placement of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel on a stable pragmatic line, his rhetoric notwithstanding, indicated another new foreign policy feature: the combination of "strategic adaptability" in the objectives with "tactical flexibility" in the ways to reach them.<sup>401</sup> Asad's expertise at mixing a variety of foreign policy instruments- limited war, negotiations, alliance formation, obstruction - as conditions changed, was the power behind this policy. Whereas wars had used to carry grand territorial ambitions in the pre-Asad era, 1973 war was limited war, a product of Asad's scaled down, realist goals. His following inclination to diplomacy was only a tactical flexibility, as a substitute to his military option. When the balance of power did not permit a settlement to Syria's favor, instead of conceding the principles, Asad preferred to work for a change in

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399 Ibid p. 180

400 Hinnebusch, *Revolution from Above*, p. 155

401 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *op. cit.* p.85

that balance through alliance with Iran and proxy strategy, alliance with the USSR and strategic parity and tactical rejectionism towards any separate Arab-Israeli deal, really with the moderate Arab camp and the US, finally joining the Gulf War coalition and the peace process were all tactical changes without abandoning the consistent objectives.<sup>402</sup>

Asad's consistent goals but flexibly changing tactics introduced new rules to the Syrian-Israeli relations. Previous Syrian dealings with Israel established a dynamic which includes both clashes, and compromises, revealing the importance of 'process' over 'agreement'. This situation proved to be a continuous line with one change: it evolved into Asad's double strategy- fighting while talking. Another inter-linked contribution to this continuous trend was Asad's proxy strategy. Despite its involvement in the peace process, Syria has permitted Hezbollah to continue its attacks. By this, while keeping the Golan front quiet, to not discourage the Israeli side for signing peace, Asad aimed to show Syria's determination and ability to keep faith with its agreements, and the price of preserving the status quo. Asad's proxy strategy could be seen as the modified continuation of "war of popular liberation" strategy. However Asad regime unlike the radical Bath, despite upgrading its military capability, he was very cautious to use it, avoided supporting guerilla raids and directly confronting Israeli troops, instead ignited his proxy war strategy, sending a message to Israel, "if you want to get rid of Hezbollah, give us the Golan Heights."<sup>403</sup>

That is to say instead of shifts from one to another, Asad regime's foreign policy towards Israel always included many cards at the same time on the table which supplemented each other. This came to be one of the driving forces of Syrian-Israeli relations, as Israel learned to retaliate by Syria's own means.

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402 Hinnebusch, op. cit. p. 153

403 Ma'oz (2004), op.cit., p. 3

Consequently, while Pre-bath governments were too weak to contemplate either war or peace with Israel, the Ba'th radicals were driven by a dangerous ideology of confronting Israel irrespective of the unfavorable balance of power. Hafez Asad introduced a policy with the still ambitious but more realistic goals to Syrian foreign policy towards Israel.<sup>404</sup> Hafez Asad put Syria in a position that there cannot be a comprehensive, lasting or stable in the Middle East without Syrian-Israeli peace. In Israel's eyes, if Israel is to enjoy stability and peace with its neighbors has to deal with Syria or neutralize its power.

However there were series of strategic difficulties that the apparent heir Bashar would face upon his takeover of Syria following his father's death, i.e. the consequences of the failed peace process with its reflections both on the relations with the US and Israel, Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, and Turkish-Israeli alliance as a potential containing threat, in the absence of; a Soviet patron that would provide field of maneuver, and unity in the Arab world that would mobilize Pan-Arab political support or financing for Syria's policies.<sup>405</sup>

As Asad considered Israel as the key geopolitical rival in Syria's geopolitical battleground, the Middle East in which the struggle is for enhancing Syria's strategic position, he yearned for leaving strong bargaining cards into Bashar's hands, as well as a favorable domestic, regional and international position vis a vis Israel.

For this end, in the domestic realm Hafez Asad carried out the necessary procedures to incapacitate any local centers of power that was likely to threaten the new leader's hold on power. In addition Hafez Asad introduced the campaign to reform the economy and administration, which would be known as the Damascus Spring under the new president's reign.

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404 Hinnebusch, op. cit. p. 149

405 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad", ORSAM Ortadoğu Etütleri, Volume 1, No 1. p.14

On the regional level, Hafez Asad worked to enhance Syria's strategic relations with Iran in a way that any improvement in Syria's relations with the USA or Israel would never be at the expense of this 'fraternal relationship', as he saw the Iranian factor as the best mean to increase Syria's power and maneuverability vis a vis Israeli military strength.<sup>406</sup>

In addition Hafez succeeded in circuiting Lebanon- Syria's only bargaining chip against Israel to his heir despite Israel's withdrawal a short time before Bashar took the office that could have led to pacification of the Lebanese-Israeli border. By arguing that a piece of land, Sheba farms- claimed as the part of the Golan Heights by Israel, in fact belonged to Lebanon, thus unless Israel withdrew from it, it would mean that the Israeli withdrawal was not completed.<sup>407</sup>

Hafez Asad sought to complete the picture by fostering the relations by building with Iraq, where he reinforced Syrian openness towards Baghdad by establishing an 'office for interests, as well as turning "a new page" with Israeli ally and NATO member Turkey towards reaching mutual understanding by signing commercial and economic agreements after coping with the 1998 crisis. On the other side of the regional equilibrium, through relations with the moderate Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, Hafez intended to open doors before Bashar in the West and help him contend with European and American pressure.<sup>408</sup>

With regard to the international web of relations, Hafez Asad bequeathed friendly relations with Europe to his son- special mention in this regard should be made of French President Jacques Chirac, who would quickly extend his patronage over the young president in Damascus and seek to serve as his

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406 Eyal Zisser, "2009 Syria's Diplomatic Comeback: What Next?", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 107–113, March 2009, p. 109

407 Rabil op. cit. p. 271

408 Zisser *ibid.*

counselor and guide.<sup>409</sup> Ziadeh argues that the relations with Europe were in turn intended to facilitate dialogue between Syria and the US which already had experienced a honeymoon thanks to the peace process; Clinton being the only president who met Asad three times. Concerning Syria's old Soviet patron, after a cold period of relations during the 1990s, Hafez Asad opted to expanding the military relations with Russia. He paid his first visit to Moscow since the end of the Cold War, which became his last<sup>410</sup> during which a loose deal was made envisioned Russia releasing pressure on Syria to repay its debts in return for becoming a long-term customer of Russian weaponry. There Asad signaled that he might be ready to rejoin the Middle East peace effort he abandoned after Benjamin Netanyahu became Israel's Prime Minister in 1996.<sup>411</sup> Syria and Russia held new highly level talks on military cooperation in September 1999. Bashar would benefit the further-sighted endeavor of his father following Putin's rise to power at the very end of 1999, as it became clear that Russia wanted to reassert its influence in the Middle East.

That is to say, through the father's bequeathing preparations in domestic, regional and international levels,<sup>412</sup> Syria was handed down to Bashar Asad in a very favorable position.<sup>413</sup> Yet the new leader was to prove his ability to manage the opportunities and challenges presented by the three environments.

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409 Ibid.

410 Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?*, (Praeger, 2007), p. 22

411 Michael Wines, "Syria Looks to Re-enter Middle East Peace Talks Assad Calls Barak Election Positive Step", *New York Times*, July 07, 1999, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1999-07-07/news/9907070297\\_1\\_syria-president-hafez-assad-middle-east](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1999-07-07/news/9907070297_1_syria-president-hafez-assad-middle-east)

412 Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*, (I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 39

413 Yorke, op. cit. p. 349

## CHAPTER 5

### SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ISRAEL IN 2000-2011

Bashar Asad took power in July 2000, and rapidly integrated in the governmental sphere as well as to the international community as the new leader of Syria thanks to the smooth transfer of power generated by Hafez Asad. The situation of Syria seemed to be extremely stable in a way to encourage both the regional states and the international community quickly to approve the way authority had been handed down.<sup>414</sup> The new leader of Syria, who was described by Western leaders and journalists as young, familiar with Western ideas, open-minded, and intelligent, created a hope that he would bring much needed domestic and foreign policy reform to the Syrian regime.

Thus upon the assumption of power Bashar Asad opted to reform the economy and administration under the campaign called the Damascus Spring, and spontaneously made a strategic opening to the West, seeking Syrian adhesion to the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, as well as promoting political dialogue with Turkey. Nonetheless these West-centric moves did not come at the expense of his father's cautious maneuvering strategy between the East and the West, thus Bashar Asad also worked to preserve the ties with Iran and promote relations with Iraq.<sup>415</sup>

Right before his assumption of power in an interview Bashar Asad stressed that internationalization, not the conflict with Israel, was the central issue of the times and would determine Syria's ability to enter the twenty-first century.<sup>416</sup> This

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414 Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*, (I.B. Tauris, 2011), p.48

415 Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar Al-Asad and the First Years in Power*, (I.B.Tauris, 2007), p. 132

416 "Bashar al-Asad: In or Out of the New World Order," *The Washington Quarterly*, Volume 28, No. 3 (Summer 2005), p. 117

signaled a salient departure from the past Syrian foreign policy, as all the previous presidents put the struggle with Syria on top of their agenda.

In his inaugural *address* Bashar outlined the contours of his foreign policy towards Israel. He called for resuming the stalled peace process, declaring: ‘We are in a hurry to realize peace but we are not ready to renounce the land and we do not accept any limitation to our sovereignty. Namely we are in a hurry for peace because it is our choice.’<sup>417</sup> Bashar Asad declared that he preferred dialogue to confrontation, while at the same time he was committed to his father’s legacy-strategic choice of peace with Israel, based on the precondition of Israeli commitment to full withdrawal from the Golan Heights to the lines of June 4, 1967.<sup>418</sup>

Hinnebusch argues that Bashar Asad’s policy towards Israel was ambiguous, reflective of his dual nationalist and modernizing impulses, what Leverett refers as Bashar’s dual role perception; the closet reformer, who wanted to take things in a different direction, facing systemic limitations and the loyal son, who wanted to continue the policies of his father.<sup>419</sup> Ziadeh emphasizes the presence of an “old guard” with influence over public opinion who opposed rooted changes and worked for preservation of their vested interests.<sup>420</sup>

The domestic and foreign policy challenges that Bashar faced just after his assumption of power forced him to cling to his roots, in Hemmer’s words.<sup>421</sup> Domestically, the reform agenda was abandoned as oppositional calls for reform

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417 Ziadeh, op. cit. p. 82

418 “Bashar’s World”, *The Economist*, 17/06/2000, Vol. 355, Issue 8175, p. 26

419 Flynt Lawrence Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, (Brookings Institution, 2005) p. 19-21

420 Ziadeh, *ibid.* p. 48

421 Christopher Hemmer, “Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: Clinging To His Roots?” in *Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures*, edited by Barry R. Schneider and Jerrold M. Post, (USAF Counterproliferation Center, 2003)

were raised especially from the Islamic circles causing fear about the stability of the regime.<sup>422</sup> It seemed that Bashar Asad was aware that Syria's longer-term stability requires change, but also he realized that his longevity was tied to the permanence of the regime, which depended on the continuation of certain policies.<sup>423</sup> As a result in mid-2001 Bashar came to label the reformists as the Western agents aiming at undermining Syria's internal stability in the service of the state's enemies, namely first and foremost Israel.<sup>424</sup> Zisser argues that the end of the Damascus Spring showed that Bashar had no clear vision of his own goals.<sup>425</sup>

In terms of foreign policy realm, the regional and international atmosphere was no longer appropriate for neither straddling the fence between the West and the East, nor engaging in peace talks with Israel. On the regional level, Israel lost its willing for peace as Ariel Sharon replaced Ehud Barak as Prime Minister in March 2001 at a time when the second Intifada was shaking the ground. The Intifada was followed by the renewed activities of Hezbollah against Israel's northern border. On the international level George W. Bush's election as the president of the US with his neoconservative cadre in January 2001 was followed by the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent International War on Terrorism.<sup>426</sup> That is to say the conjuncture that enabled Syrian foreign policy to be conducted on a middle line, and prepared the Madrid peace talks was altered in every three levels. Consolidating his rule at Damascus, as well as the Arab street while preserving Syria's regional standing and specifically managing Syria's interests in Lebanon,

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422 Najib Ghabdian, "The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria", Middle East Journal, Vol. 55, No. 4, Autumn 2001, pp. 638

423 "Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges", ICG Middle East Report, No: 24, (Amman/Brussels, 11 February 2004), p.6

424 Zisser, *Bashar In or Out of the New World Order*, p. 117

425 Eyal Zisser, "Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria?", Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter 2003, p. 19

426 Leverett, *op. cit.* p. 102



seemed as more immediate foreign policy goals than making peace with Israel for Bashar Asad.

The renewed Hezbollah activity in the Sheba farms became a central issue on the Syrian agenda from late 2000 onward. Following Israeli withdrawal from Hezbollah, taking benefit from Intifada, had taken control of the entire Lebanese-Israeli border area militarily, politically and administratively, and renewed its activity in October.<sup>427</sup> As Zisser puts it, although it was not Syria who initiated the attacks - at most Syrians may have been informed by Hezbollah about its general intentions, demonstrating the new equation between Syria and Hezbollah after Asad's death,<sup>428</sup> the United States and Israel held Syria responsible for these operations.<sup>429</sup> Thus the situation in Lebanon presented twofold problems for Bashar: growing criticism of the Syrian presence in Lebanon, and fear in Syria of a military confrontation with Israel.<sup>430</sup>

At this juncture, as a response to the newly emerging reality in the region which directly affects Syria's position vis a vis Israel, Bashar preferred to follow a radical line. Syria resumed support to Palestinian militant groups by allowing them to operate and plan attacks against Israeli targets from Damascus.<sup>431</sup> He agreed to the establishment of 'the Syrian Arab Popular Committee for supporting the Intifada and resisting the Zionist project' - of which the main objective was to offer tangible support for the Intifada from all Syrian governorates.<sup>432</sup> Moreover he redeployed the Syrian army in Lebanon in November 2000, thus risking the

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427 Robert Rabil, *Embattled Neighbors Syria, Israel, and Lebanon* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), p. 272

428 Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p. 150

429 Ziadeh, *op. cit.* p. 84

430 Zisser *ibid.* p. 183

431 Stephen Zunes, "The Peace Process Between Israel and Syria", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Vol. 7, No. 5, (May 2002), [http://www.fpif.org/reports/the\\_peace\\_process\\_between\\_israel\\_and\\_syria](http://www.fpif.org/reports/the_peace_process_between_israel_and_syria)

432 Ziadeh, *op. cit.* p. 85

danger of military escalation with Israel.<sup>433</sup> Reportedly, as Zisser puts it, when he was asked to restrain Hezbollah in late 2000, Bashar replied that Syria was not afraid of Israel and that it could deal with Israel *inter alia* by means of the missiles in its possession.<sup>434</sup>

According to Zisser, Bashar saw the anti-Israeli mood in the Arab and Damascus Street fostered by the Intifada as a chance to prove his leadership at home and abroad, as well as entrenching Syria's regional posture as the protector of Arab rights.<sup>435</sup> In fact increasing hostility towards Israel in Arab Street, including Damascus, i.e. violent demonstrations in Damascus in October and November 2001, contributed his hardening stance towards Israel.<sup>436</sup> From Hemmer's perspective, Bashar, as part of a generation that did not experience defeat by Israel, rather one that witnessed the struggle of Hezbollah during 1980s, the struggle of the Palestinians during the Intifadas, and the Israeli pullout from Lebanon, underestimated Israel, learning that Israel could be defeated.<sup>437</sup>

For the Israelis, the situation in late 2000 was reminiscent of that on the eve of the 1967 war.<sup>438</sup> Contrary to the fears, Bashar in practice avoided taking any direct step against Israel, and refrained from closing the door entirely on the peace talks.<sup>439</sup> Zisser argues that while Bashar continued to reject the legitimacy of Israel, viewing it within ideological terms as an artificial, aggressive, and expansionist entity with which peace was difficult if not impossible to attain, at the same time he viewed Israel as a fact, and recognized Israel's military

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433 Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p. 162

434 *Ibid.* p. 162

435 Zisser, *Bashar In or Out*, p. 122

436 *Ibid.* p. 151

437 Hemmer, *op. cit.* p. 225

438 Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p. 162

439 Shmuel Bar, "Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview", Institute for Policy and Strategy Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel, 2006, pp. 354. 408

superiority and futility of mounting an all-out war against it, thus acknowledged the historic necessity to reach a political settlement.<sup>440</sup>

Nevertheless Bashar Asad introduced some setbacks in Syria's peace understanding. At the Arab Leaders' summit of October 2000 convened in the wake of the Intifada, Bashar declared that peace must be "peace of the strong", that through not an overall confrontation, but a limited armed struggle like the Palestinians and Hezbollah successfully demonstrated, Israel would be forced to accept the Arabs' peace dictates. Zisser remarks that this was a clear retreat from the perception of the "peace of the brave" of his father.<sup>441</sup> Another setback was revealed by his first prolonged press interview in February 2001. Accordingly, a comprehensive peace plan must include Palestinian track, in addition to the Lebanese and Syrian one.<sup>442</sup> Zisser interprets this as a clear act to exploit the effect of the Intifada.<sup>443</sup>

An additional setback could be found in Bashar's continuous questioning of Israel's position on peace. Ziadeh argues that the election of Sharon had a direct influence on Bashar Asad's discourse. Asad continually described Israeli society as a 'society unprepared for peace, a society that elected Sharon'.<sup>444</sup>

In April 2001, Israel, seeking to make Bashar's radical strategy too costly<sup>445</sup>, attacked on Syrian radar installations in Lebanon, in retaliation for a Hezbollah attack on Israeli army positions in Sheba farms. The US, concerned with Syria's increasing economic relations with Iraq, support for Palestinian

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440 Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p. 151-153

441 Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, pp. 154-156

442 Ziadeh, *op. cit.* p.85

443 Zisser, *ibid.* p. 163

444 Ziadeh *ibid.*

445 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad" , ORSAM Ortadoğu Etütleri, Volume 1, No 1. p.16

groups and aid for Hezbollah, refrained from censuring Israel.<sup>446</sup> Syria chose to not take any retaliatory action, but tempered the rhetoric against Israel, threatening that Israel would pay for the assault.<sup>447</sup> The most outstanding proclamation of the Syrian president came in May 2001 during Pope's visit to Syria, when he equated Israel with the Nazis. Ziadeh indicates as he faced a wave of political criticism in the Western media, Bashar mentioned that peace was still the strategic option for Syria, and it would be ready to acknowledge Israel 'when Israel is ready to offer real peace'.<sup>448</sup>

In July 2001 Israel staged another attack on Syrian radar installations in Lebanon. Following that Bashar reiterated that while Sharon clearly and openly sought war, peace was a Syrian ideology and not just a political strategy. In another interview, he said: 'We will remain firm and resist aggression even if we estimate that the enemy will destroy a lot of our public utilities. And we have the means to do extreme harm to the enemy.'<sup>449</sup> The huge gap between Bashar's discourse and practice reminded that of pre-Asad Ba'thist rule. It seemed that rather than continuing from the point where his father left, Bashar started all over again.<sup>450</sup>

September 11, 2001 attack brought about a sharp change in international and regional realities, similar to the collapse of the USSR and the 1991 Gulf War in its wake.<sup>451</sup> However its implications for the Middle East and Syria in particular were to be harsher because this time the US, emerging from the terrorist attacks, was more determined to strike at its enemies. Although Bush left Syria out from his list of the countries making up an "axis of evil" in his State of Union address

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446 Zisser, *ibid.* p. 133

447 *Ibid.* p. 160

448 *Ibid.* p. 87

449 Ziadeh *op. cit.* p. 88

450 Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, pp. 19-20

451 *Ibid.* p. 133

in January 2002, he clearly articulated that Damascus could not straddle the line unlike the previous decade, and compelled the country to make a choice with respect to any US potential future action against Iraq, Iran, or Hezbollah.<sup>452</sup> In a speech expressing his viewpoint regarding the Arab Peace Initiative approved at Arab Summit in Beirut in March 2002, Bush said 'leaders who want to participate in the peace process have to demonstrate unconditional support for peace through their actions.'<sup>453</sup> Namely Washington completely bypassed the Syrian right to retrieve the Golan Heights, and dictated that no longer could the differences between the US and Syria be resolved as part of a Syrian-Israeli peace process. Even for the start of such process, Syria had to comply with the conditions of the US which means cutting its ties with Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran, whom Syria saw as its only remaining assets.<sup>454</sup>

Despite all, Syria's perception of the rules of the game remained persistent, thus, the answer given by Syria to the 9\11 attacks was identical to the one in early 1990s. On the one hand, Syria took steps to prevent a frontal and direct confrontation with Washington; and provided some useful intelligence to US about al-Qaida cells operating in Syria and Europe, as well as sending peace signals to Israel, while on the other hand continued to seek to earn credit through pushing an ideological discourse.<sup>455</sup>

In October 2001, at the Arab summit in Cairo convened specifically to support the Intifada, Bashar suggested that Arabs should sever all relations with Israel and its allies. Furthermore Bashar went on consolidating the strategic partnership with Iran in January 2002, backing Hezbollah to escalate along

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452 Rabil, op.cit., p. 278

453 Ziadeh, ibid.pp. 90-91

454 David Lensch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria*, (Yale University Press, 2005), p. 73

455 Moshe Ma'oz, "Washington and Damascus: Between Confrontation and Cooperation", *United States Institute of Peace Special Report*, (Washington, DC: USIP, 2005), p. 4

Israel's border, as well as strengthening economic and commercial relations with Iraq.<sup>456</sup>

In response to the intensified Hezbollah activity, IAF jets flew over Bashar Asad's palace in his hometown of Qardaha in October 2002. Besides, not giving any military reaction, two months after the Israeli menace, Bashar signaled that Syria was ready for renewal of the peace process. As Zisser notes, in a meeting with British academics, Bashar Asad said "I have a message for the Israelis. We are interested in peace...On the condition that it withdraws to the 1967 border".

<sup>457</sup> Although this shift led to the impression that Syria was to adapt to the new geopolitical reality, that option soon faded away, as Sharon seemed uninterested in peace, and the United States started making preparations to wage war against Iraq.<sup>458</sup>

Syria quickly sided with Iraq, and took the lead in the Arab world to criticize and oppose the war. In Damascus's lexicon the war in Iraq was merely an attempt to redraw the map of the region for American and Israeli benefit.<sup>459</sup> Following the outbreak of the war, Syria turned a blind eye to the weapon smuggling from Syria to Iraq.<sup>460</sup> After the war had started, Bashar al-Asad expressed the basis of his support to Iraqi resistance in an interview on 27 March 2003, and said: "Even if the American scheme succeeds – and we doubt whether it will – there will be a popular Arab resistance which has already started".<sup>461</sup> The Syrian position was no different than the rest of the Arab world in general, but

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<sup>456</sup> Zaideh, op. cit. p. 84

<sup>457</sup> Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p. 161

<sup>458</sup> Ziadeh, *ibid.* pp. 90-91

<sup>459</sup> Zisser, *ibid.* p. 139

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.* p. 127

<sup>461</sup> Zaideh, *ibid.* p. 92

what distinguished it from the others was Syria's counting on the ability of the Iraqi regime to thwart the American intervention.<sup>462</sup>

Presumably, most of the considerations that brought Hafez al-Asad to cooperate with the Coalition in the first Iraq War should have been valid for Bashar. The status of the U.S. as the world's sole superpower had been enhanced, the events of 9/11 and the American invasion of Afghanistan had shown the extent of the resolve of the present U.S. President, and Saddam's Arab and international legitimacy had eroded. Nevertheless, Bashar's policy invited a direct confrontation with the United States in a manner his father would never have risked. Several factors influenced Bashar's behavior.<sup>463</sup>

First, as mentioned above, Bashar did not really believe either that the U.S. would carry out its threat of attacking the Iraqi regime, or he did not foresee the almost instantaneous collapse of that regime.<sup>464</sup> Second Bashar weighed that complying with the American demands in exchange for not even the promise of anything like reassuming the Syrian-Israeli peace talks, would mean losing all the bargaining cards against Israel.<sup>465</sup> Third as the American occupation of Iraq has made the U.S. Syria's "neighbor", the recurring Syrian fear of being sandwiched between the US and Israel<sup>466</sup> and of being encircled by Western-oriented, pro-Israeli regimes including Turkey to the north and Jordan to the south, in the light of Lebanon's increasingly questionable amity<sup>467</sup>, Bashar made the calculation that he would best be served by using his resources to ensure that the United States

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462 Zaideh, op. cit. p. 92

463 Bar, op. cit. p. 413

464 Ibid.

465 Syria under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges, International Crisis Group, February 2004, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/Syria%20Under%20Bashar%201%20Foreign%20Policy%20Challenges.ashx>

466 Itamar Rabinovich, "Syria at crossroads Syria at a Crossroads", INSS, (April 2009), p. 97, [http://cdn.www.inss.org.il/reblazecdn.net/upload/\(FILE\)1248343837.pdf](http://cdn.www.inss.org.il/reblazecdn.net/upload/(FILE)1248343837.pdf)

467 Lensch, op. cit. p. 7

meets with failure in its mission.<sup>468</sup> Fourth Bashar saw Iraq as a first step in a wider American strategy to clear the Middle East of all regimes considered hostile to the U.S., fearing that Syria will be the next.<sup>469</sup> This fear was shared by its strategic ally Iran, thus clearly influenced the Syrian assessment. The Iranian regime regarded a stabilized oil-rich pro-American Iraq as a clear and imminent threat to its own existence. Through high-level consultations, Syria and Iran were decisive to cooperate to avert the danger.<sup>470</sup> Fifth factor was the domestic considerations. Internal tensions within Syria coming from particularly fundamentalist elements, which had been forcibly put down in 1982, have subsequently resurfaced in the wake of and during the war in Iraq.<sup>471</sup> Bashar had no choice but to pay attention to their identification of themselves with anti-American stance, and taking position with the Iraqis.<sup>472</sup> Allowing radical Islamists to act against the American presence in Iraq would shift the focus of local Islamists away from acting against the regime.<sup>473</sup> In addition Bashar feared that in case Iraq loses its territorial integrity, this may incite irredentism in Syria, too, especially by Syrian Kurds. This fright was proved to be pertinent when in early March 2004 a Kurdish uprising erupted.<sup>474</sup> A less influential domestic incentive could be regarded as the economic factor. The collapse of Iraqi regime would mean loss of Syrian economic interests halting the smuggled Iraqi oil to Syria and sanction violating trade between the two countries would undermine the Syrian economy. Finally, besides enhancing his legitimacy at home, Bashar's attitude was also directed at inter-Arab sphere. Observing and supposedly admiring Saddam's self-confidence and defiance of the U.S. envying his popularity with the

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468 Jason D. Brookhyser, *The Syrian Turn: Israeli-Syrian Peace and the New Moment in US Grand Strategy*, American Diplomacy, August 2007, [http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2007/0709/broo/brookhyser\\_syria.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2007/0709/broo/brookhyser_syria.html)

469 Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p.132

470 Bar, *op. cit.* pp. 354-413

471 Zisser, *Bashar In or Out*, p. 118

472 Lensch, *op. cit.* p. 75

473 Bar, *ibid*

474 Zisser, *ibid*.



Arab street, and Bashar Asad was said to be hoping that he could cash in on that popularity by supporting Saddam.<sup>475</sup>

From another perspective Bashar followed the legacy of Hafez Asad- providing safe heaven to terrorist organizations acting against neighboring countries and allowing them to operate from Syrian soil. Accordingly, such support would serve as a valuable bargaining chip for future negotiations with the challenged country- in this case pro-American Iraq.<sup>476</sup> As a result, as the external threat mounted with certain possible ramifications on the domestic scene, Bashar adopted a combination of Arab, Syrian and Islamic nationalism, thus a more aggressive foreign policy stand.<sup>477</sup>

Syrian prediction proved wrong and the Iraqi Ba'th regime fell dramatically on 9 April 2003. The post-Saddam Middle East presented a dual reality for Syria. The first was its entrance into the frame as the next domino to fall.<sup>478</sup> The second was the emergence of a renewed sense of hope for peace in the region with the release of the Road Map plan of the Quartet for the solution of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, like an opportunity for peace following the Gulf War in 1991.<sup>479</sup>

At this juncture, the Syrian regime favored to take an accommodative line. In May 2003, Bashar Assad accepted the separation of Palestinian track from the Syrian- Lebanese one.<sup>480</sup> As Ziadeh claims, in the same month, although Bashar Asad and Ariel Sharon denied, secret contacts occurred between Syria and Israel.

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475 Bar, *ibid*

476 *Ibid*.

477 Lensch *ibid*.

478 Ziadeh, *op. cit.* p. 94

479 "Powell Outlines Objectives of Talks with Syrian Leaders", May 3, 2003, <http://usinfo.state.gov/mena/Archive/2004/Feb/05-275016.html>.

480 Carsten Wieland, "The Gaza war and the Syria-Israel front", February 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/the-gaza-war-and-the-syria-israel-front>

Consequently, the Israeli prime minister turned down the offer that made through mediators, to resume negotiations, to not 'create circumstances that would decrease American pressure on Syria.'<sup>481</sup>

Nonetheless the initial hope for peace was frustrated as the circumstances were much different than they were at the beginning of the 1990s. Although the Israeli attitude led by Shamir administration was identical to the one in 1991 - not much interested in a political settlement with Syria, what created the difference was the unwillingness of the US.<sup>482</sup> The Bush administration was far from eager for an intensive diplomacy. In addition Syria had no credit in American eyes, being labeled as "off-balance", "in panic mode", "unable to adjust to the new regional situation"<sup>483</sup>

In the aftermath of the Iraq war, Bashar Asad ended up in only succeeding to maintain his domestic credibility, whereas his father gained reliability both at home and in the region when he sided with the US in the Gulf War despite of the certain amount of opposition of the Syrian people. Nevertheless the increase of resistance in Iraq and the absence of a clear post-Saddam vision in American thinking restored the Syrian self confidence. Refraining from complying with the US' demands, Syria rather sharpened the anti-American tone of its statements<sup>484</sup> and stiffened its stance toward Israel.<sup>485</sup>

In August 2003 IAF planes overflew Bashar's palace once again to convey a warning to the president to rein Hezbollah attacks.<sup>486</sup> Two months later Israel

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481 Ziadeh, p. 94

482 Robert Novak, "Pressuring Syria", Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, Vol. 22, Issue 5, June 2003, p. 16

483 Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report, No. 23, 11 Feb 2004, p. 3,

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/Syria%20Under%20Bashar%202%20Domestic%20Policy%20Challenges.ashx>

484 Zisser, Commanding Syria, p. 142

485 Zisser, Commanding Syria, p. 164

486 Ibid. p.165

launched its deepest raid into Syria to bomb an Islamic Jihad training base in north of Damascus in retaliation for the suicide bombing of in Haifa.<sup>487</sup> The Israeli attack was the first on Syrian soil since 1973 war, and a clear violation of the agreement between Syria and Israel signed in 1974 for the disengagement of forces. Syria perceived the attack as an Israeli-American move to destabilize and possibly bring down the Syrian regime. In response to neutralize the criticism at home due to its helplessness against Israel,<sup>488</sup> Syria threatened to attack Israeli settlements in the Golan area.<sup>489</sup>

As a sign of support to the Israeli strike<sup>490</sup>, the United States Congress ratified the 'Syrian Accountability Act',<sup>491</sup> dropping its long-standing objection to congressional sanctions on Damascus.<sup>492</sup> The U.S. sanctions damaged and even blocked Syria's already failing economy's efforts to integrate into the international economy.<sup>493</sup> Hinnebusch remarks that believing that much of US animosity to Syria was propelled by the neo-con's Likud connection, Bashar tried to disarm them by proposing to restart the peace negotiations with Israel.

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487Chris McGreal, "Israeli jets hit Syria camp in blast revenge", Guardian, October, 06, 2003,<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/oct/06/syria.israel3>

488 Zisser, *ibid.* p. 165

489 David Harrison, "Syria threatens to attack Golan settlers if Israel strikes again", The Daily Telegraph, October 26, 2003, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/1445169/Syria-threatens-to-attack-Golan-settlers-if-Israel-strikes-again.html>

490 Moshe Ma'oz, "The Precarious Triangle", at <http://usa.mediamonitors.net/content/view/full/1900>, November, 06, 2003

491 The Act threatens to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions against Syria if Damascus continues to harbor terrorist organizations, to develop weapons of mass destruction, and to occupy Lebanon. And the Bush administration ordered the economic sanctions on May, 2004 against Syria for supporting terrorism and not doing enough to prevent militant fighters from entering neighboring Iraq. "US to impose sanctions on Syria this week", *Ha'aretz*, May 11, 2004

492 Ziadeh, *op cit.* p. 96

493 Zisser, *Bashar in or out*, p. 126

Thus in an attempt to reduce these pressures, in an interview in December 2003 President Bashar Asad stressed his desire to unconditionally revive peace talks with Israel.<sup>494</sup> He even announced his preparedness to establish normal (*tabi'yya*) relations, which Hafez Asad refrained from mentioning. Bashar, when asked said that “I mean normal relations... You may have warm or cold relations. I am very optimistic after the peace is signed. If it is a just and comprehensive peace there will be no problem.”<sup>495</sup>

Both Israel and the United States dismissed such tentative signals, which they considered to be an indication of the pressure and distress that Bashar felt rather than a true and honest desire for peace.<sup>496</sup> Moreover in response to Bashar's call, Sharon said that in the event of talks between Israel and Syria, they would start from the beginning rather than the 2000 deliberations.<sup>497</sup> Israel also conditioned renewing talks on Syrian stopping all support for Palestinian terror groups and backing for Hezbollah.<sup>498</sup>

On the reverse of the medal there was another story which only came on the scene in January 2007 by a leak in Israeli daily Ha'aretz. As Former Israeli Foreign Ministry Director General Alon Liel describes, Bashar Asad during his visit to Turkey in January 2004, asked Prime Minister Erdogan to mediate peace talks with Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon rejected the offer as he was busy with disengagement from Gaza, however he authorized Liel, who offered to initiate a two-track diplomacy. The secret talks started under Turkish auspices through Alon Liel on the Israeli side and Abe Soleiman a Syrian-American with

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494 Neil Macfarquhar, “Syrian Pressing For Israel Talks”, The New York Times, December, 01, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/01/world/syrian-pressing-for-israel-talks.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> New York Times

495 Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, p. 166

496 Zisser, *Bashar in or out*, p. 125

497 “PM: Syria talks must start from scratch”, *Ha'aretz*, December 29, 2003

498 “Israel: Syria must stop terror aid before talks”, *Ha'aretz*, January 11, 2004, “Sharon: Syria must stop its support for terror before talks”, *Ha'aretz*, January 12, 2004

close family ties to Bashar Asad on the side of Syria in January 2004. As Sharon rejected the talks to be moved into official level, Turkey ceased mediating, and from September 2004 onwards until a final meeting in July 2006 during the fighting in Lebanon the Syrian-Israeli backchannel continued under the mediation of Switzerland.<sup>499</sup>

Throughout 2004, on the one hand Bashar Asad continued to reiterate his desire to renew official peace negotiations with Israel with no preconditions under American auspices.<sup>500</sup> On the other hand Syria facilitated the rocket armament of Hezbollah as a deterrent against the increased Israeli threat.<sup>501</sup> It seemed that Bashar adopted his father's fighting while talking strategy.<sup>502</sup> Thus peace overtures continued to draw skeptical response from the Bush administration,<sup>503</sup> reelected in November 2004, more decisive on isolating the Asad regime, thus opposing the resumption of the Israeli-Syrian negotiations.<sup>504</sup>

The isolation that Syria faced in the regional and international arena because of the failure to effectively respond to the changes introduced by the 2003 Iraq War, reached its nadir as on April 26, 2005 when Syria totally ended its 28 years of presence on Lebanese soil.<sup>505</sup> Hinnebusch articulates that the setting up of

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499 Interview with Alon Liel, October 28, 2010, in Tel Aviv, Israel.

500 Interview with Bashar Asad, *New York Times*, December 1, 2003

501 Hinnebusch, "Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad", p. 16

502 Eyal Zisser, "Whither Syria?", *Middle East of International Affairs*, Volume 11, No.1 (March 2007), pp. 21-22.

503 "Syrian calls for peace talks with Israel draw US skepticism", *Ha'aretz*, June 6, 2004

504 Itamar Rabinovich, "How To Talk And How Not To Talk To Syria: Assessing The Obstacles To And Opportunities In A Future Israeli-Syrian-American Peace Negotiation", *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy*, Number 18, May 2010, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2010/5/syria%20israel%20rabinovich/05\\_syria\\_israel\\_rabinovich.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2010/5/syria%20israel%20rabinovich/05_syria_israel_rabinovich.pdf)

505 Ziadeh op. cit. p. 123

an international tribunal to investigate the Hariri assassination was seen in Syria as a tool of regime change.<sup>506</sup>

Syria simultaneously was alarmed that the wider regional tide threatens both the regional and domestic posture of the regime. By backing Sunni insurgents in Iraq, it fuelled instability which could spill over into Syria.<sup>507</sup> Saudi–Egyptian–Syrian axis was also damaged because of Syria’s alleged link to Hariri murder.<sup>508</sup>

By the mid-2000s Syria had found itself involved in a struggle for the Middle East between the “moderate” axis -aligned with the US, backed by the EU, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan and “radical” axis- composed of Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. Facing absolute isolation from the West, Syria configured its post-withdrawal strategy as keeping the Hezbollah card<sup>509</sup>, and to make sure Lebanon would not become a platform for regime change in Syria.<sup>510</sup>

In June 2006 IAF jets flew over Bashar al- Asad’s palace in his hometown of Qardaha in northern Syria in response to the kidnapping of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit by Hamas.<sup>511</sup> Syria, deprived of its Lebanese card for the moment, chose to push for carrying the secret talks to official level. However Israel promptly refused the offer to not let Syria break out of isolation.<sup>512</sup>

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506 Hinnebusch, “Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad”, p. 24

507 Ziadeh, *ibid.* p.125

508 *Ibid* p. 123

509 Carsten Wieland, Syria’s Challenges After The Election Year: Is Bashar Al-Asad Part Of The Problem Or Part Of The Solution In The Middle East?, Pap. Polít. Bogotá (Colombia), Vol. 12, No. 1, pp.227-228

510 Hinnebusch, *ibid.*

511 Eyal Zisser, “It’s a Long road to Peace with Syria,” Strategic Assessment, Vol. 11, No. 2 (November 2008), p. 108

512 Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges, International Crisis Group, p. ii

The chance to alter the regional balance of power for Syria to make a comeback, arrived with the Second Lebanon War. The war in the summer of 2006 was not only a confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel, but a mini play out of regional conflicts between the “moderate” and “radical” axes to determine the shape that the Middle East would take.

During the war, Syria provided unconditional support for Hezbollah, made massive arms deliveries to it in line with its post-withdrawal strategy.<sup>513</sup> On the other hand, at the height of the war, Syria continued to negotiate unofficially with Israel, as well as demanding to carry the negotiations into official level.<sup>514</sup> It seemed that Bashar was well into his father’s established pattern of using of proxies to guarantee negotiating from position of strength.

As the war had demonstrated the close cooperation between Damascus, Tehran, and Hezbollah, Syria’s regional standing enhanced during the war, and let the emergence of voices circulating the view that isolating Syria had been counter-productive because it prompted the latter to consolidate its relations with the radical axis.<sup>515</sup>

Israel's decision in August 14, 2006, to end the war in Lebanon without achieving its goals- a return of the Israeli soldiers seized by Hezbollah and an end to Hezbollah's ability to fire rockets into northern Israel, represented a moment of recovery and advancement for Syria. With Israel failed in Lebanon, the U.S. military embroiled in Iraq, making any American attempt to destabilize the regime in Bashar’s eyes, Washington's rhetoric exposed as empty, Iran and Hezbollah empowered, Hamas won the elections in Gaza, Syria looked like a gambler who bet on the right horse.<sup>516</sup>

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513 Hinnebusch, “Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad, p. 16

514 Ibid p. 10

515Eyal Zisser, “Where is syria heading?”, Middle East Quarterly, Winter 2008, pp. 35-40, <http://www.meforum.org/1819/where-is-bashar-al-assad-heading>

516 Zisser, *ibid*.

On August 15, 2006, the day after a cease-fire ended fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, Assad claimed victory for himself and Syria. In his postwar speech to the fourth conference of the Journalists' Union in Damascus, while Bashar declared that he viewed the results of the battles as an important, and even historic, victory of the Hezbollah organization he severely criticized most Arab rulers, accusing them of being 'half men', brining Syria's relations with the moderate Arab states to a new low.

Moreover Syrian president Bashar Asad felt confident enough, perhaps thinking that Syrian missiles, more advanced than Hezbollah's arsenal<sup>517</sup>, could achieve the same effect should the Syrian regime sponsor a Hezbollah-like campaign on the Golan Heights, to threaten Israel that if it did not withdraw from the Golan Heights. In his words:

With a tone more forceful than in years past, Assad gave Israel the option of peace or confrontation: Either Israel could withdraw from the Golan Heights to the shores of the Sea of Galilee or risk a war of attrition on the Golan Heights similar to what Israel experienced with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.<sup>518</sup>

Several Syrian officials in this period gave declarations in similar manner to international and Arab media. Indeed, on June 26, 2006, during a ceremony commemorating the 1974 return of the border town of Qunaytra seized during the previous year's war, Syrian officials announced the establishment of the Popular Resistance Committees for the Liberation of the Golan Heights. Media reports in Israel mentioned these committees in connection to several incidents, such as setting fires and blocking roads in the Golan. These were accompanied by both the Syrian and Israeli militaries, preparations for the possibility of renewed

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517 Ephraim Kam, "The Impact of the War on Arab Security Concepts," in Shlomo Brom and Meir Eliran, eds. *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives* (Tel Aviv: The Institute for National Security Studies, 2007), pp. 197-208.

518 Eyal Zisser, "An Israeli Watershed Strike on Syria", *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2008, pp. 57-62 <http://www.meforum.org/1932/an-israeli-watershed-strike-on-syria>



conflict with fortifications, rearmament, and robust training exercises— generated an atmosphere of tension and sense of impending war.<sup>519</sup>

In August 2006 the president of the European Commission invited Syrian Foreign Minister Muqallam to Helsinki, the first visit of a Syrian foreign minister since the establishment of the EU. This visit was taken as a sign that the isolation policy adopted after the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister had now ended. A partnership agreement with the European Union- initialed at the end of 2004 but had been delayed pending the results of the Hariri investigation, was again on the agenda.<sup>520</sup>

While Syria was preparing for war against Israel, it continued to call for peace confidently, from a position of strength. In an interview in September 2006, Bashar al-Asad explained Syria's position on peace by saying:

I do not share the view that Israel should be wiped off the map. After all, we want to make peace with it. I believe that any time is the right time for making peace, especially following a war. Syria and Israel can live side by side in harmony and recognize each other's existence. We held talks in the 1990s, and we do not conduct negotiations with a country only in order to wipe it off the map afterwards.<sup>521</sup>

That is to say, the Second Lebanon War became a significant milestone in Israel-Syria relations. Since the end of the Second Lebanon War between Israel and the Hezbollah organization, Israel-Syria relations have fluctuated between concern over the outbreak of a confrontation and hope for renewing the peace process between the two countries, with possibly achieving a breakthrough. This was because of disappearance of the room for maneuver that existed between the sides since Bashar's assumption of power in the new balance of power generated by the Second Lebanon War.<sup>522</sup> Starting from 2001, Israel attacked Syrian targets

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519 Eyal Zisser, "It's a Long road to Peace with Syria," Strategic Assessment, Vol. 11, No. 2 (November 2008), p. 107

520 Ziadeh, p. 120

521 Ibid. pp. 113-120

522 Ibid p. 109

on several occasions. While on each of those occasions there was no response, for its part, Syria undertook activities hostile to Israel, among them providing Hezbollah with advanced arms, including during the Second Lebanon War, and hosting the Hamas and Islamic Jihad headquarters in Damascus. Namely, Bashar Asad, too, apparently took for granted that there was room for both sides to maneuver against the interests of the other without concern that this could lead to full scale confrontation. However, after the Second Lebanon War, this field of maneuver appeared to have vanished, so that the sides were no longer willing or able – in terms of the heightened rhetoric and tension, as well as the increased military deployment – to accommodate the other's mistakes, not to mention the other side's provocations. As such, any incident on either side of the border, including the most limited, could lead to large scale escalation, even if this outcome was unintended. The tensions arisen after the war upset the equation that had existed between the two countries until then, and the new reality that largely favored Syria enabled Bashar to try to create new rules of the game.<sup>523</sup> Another factor in improving Syria's position was revitalized ties with Russia and provision of advanced weaponry following Bashar's visit to Moscow in January 2005.<sup>524</sup>

In December 2006 the Iraq Study Group (ISG) often referred to as the Baker-Hamilton commission issued a report which recommended resumption of Syria-Israel peace talks, and Israel to give Golan back in exchange for Syria's interlocutor role to address the quagmire in Iraq.<sup>525</sup> Voices in the US in favor of engaging with Syria started to increase. In April 2007 Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives met with President Assad - first visit by an American politician since the ambassador's withdrawal following the Hariri murder. Pelosi said after the meetings "We came in friendship, hope, and determined that the road to Damascus is a road to peace" and reportedly delivered

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<sup>523</sup> Zisser, *ibid.* p. 107

<sup>524</sup> "Russia opposes UN action on Syria", *BBC News*, October, 26, 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4377148.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4377148.stm)

<sup>525</sup> Lee Kass, "Syria after Lebanon: The Growing Syrian Missile Threat," *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2005, pp. 25-34.

to him a message from Prime Minister Olmert that Israel was ready for peace talks.<sup>526</sup> In May 3, 2007 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met briefly with her Syrian counterpart, Walid al-Moallem, at an Iraq summit in Egypt. A stronger step toward ending Syria's isolation came from the US when in November 2007 Asad was invited to a summit meeting at Annapolis, Maryland. Although Assad did not attend, the meeting opened the way for serious but indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel with Turkish mediation.<sup>527</sup>

The leak of the unofficial talks in January 2007 embarrassed the Syrian officials, as they were alleged to be simultaneously reaching out to Israel and mobilizing public support for Hezbollah at the height of the Lebanon war. Syria initially dismissed the discussions as insignificant rather than use them as a means of demonstrating Syria's seriousness on peace and of pressuring Israel.<sup>528</sup> In March 2007, two months after the leak of the talks, President Bashar expressed in an interview with a clear reference to the unofficial peace talks "They [the envoys] openly said, quoting Olmert that the decision is in Washington". Thus Bashar concluded: "The issue of peace in at least the next two years [until the US elections in 2009] doesn't call for optimism unless there are unexpected changes". Bashar's statements illustrated that Bashar felt he was in a position of strength, and therefore had no need to make any concessions to Israel.<sup>529</sup>

Alon Liel states that Syrian increased self-confidence reflected on the Syrian-Israeli backchannel under Swiss auspices, as it became hard to get any concession from Syria. The secret channel finally failed as Israel refused the Syrian calls to carry it on the official level. Nevertheless the second track

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526 Brookhyser, op. cit.

527 Nizar Abdel-Kader, "From Isolation to Center Stage", January 8, 2010, <http://www.mei.nus.edu.sg/blog/country/syria/syrias-emergence-from-isolation>

528 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, 10 April 2007, Middle East Report N°63, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/46320c752.html>, February 21, 2013, p.14

529 Zisser, "It's a Long road to Peace with Syria", pp. 113-120

diplomacy that persisted over the course of two years and eight meetings produced a draft peace agreement based on Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights to the lines of 4 June.<sup>530</sup> Syria demanded the pullout be carried out over a five-year period, while Israel asked for the withdrawal to be spread out over 15 years, hence the timetable for the withdrawal remained open. An innovative idea-park on the Golan Heights at the buffer zone, along Lake Kinneret was put forth. Accordingly, the park would be set up for joint use by the Israelis and Syrians, and would cover a significant portion of the Golan Heights. Israelis would be free to access the park and their presence would not be dependent on Syrian approval. Regarding the water problem, Israel was to retain control over the use of the waters of the Jordan River and Lake Kinneret. The border area would be demilitarized along a 1:4 ratio (in terms of territory) in Israel's favor. Finally according to the terms, Syria would also agree to end its support for Hezbollah and Hamas and will distance itself from Iran.<sup>531</sup>

On May 27, 2007, Syrians elected Bashar al-Assad to a second 7-year term as president, reminding that Bashar Asad has survived seven years in charge. He made use of the isolation years to concentrate on the domestic front in a way to consolidate his rule.<sup>532</sup> The prudent old guard was also eliminated, giving Bashar considerable autonomy in foreign policy making. In addition Washington's targeting Syrian the regime for its stands on behalf of still popular Arab causes-its support of Palestine, its association with Hizbollah and its opposition to the invasion of Iraq-led Syrian people rally around the government. The possibility of spillover of the sectarian conflict in Iraq, along with the fear-ignited by the Kurdish riots of 2003 and the rise of Islamic militancy was another factor in generating legitimacy for the regime. Syria's external environment was radically

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530 For fulltext of the Draft: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/exclusive-full-text-of-document-drafted-during-secret-talks-1.210053>

531 Akiva Eldar, "Israeli, Syrian representatives reach secret understandings" *Ha'aretz*, January 16, 2007, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israeli-syrian-representatives-reach-secret-understandings-1.210158>

532Elias Samo, "Syria in 2009: A Good Year", January 07, 2010, <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/inside.php?id=1221>

altered, too. The US invasion of Iraq was now a quagmire, Israel more inclined to peace, Iran, now formally allied to Assad's regime, had emerged as the regional superpower - setting the agenda and seemingly pursuing nuclear weapons with impunity.

In an address he gave on July 17, 2007 to the Syrian People's Assembly at the start of his second term as president, Bashar evaluated peace option with Israel. Accordingly, first option would be Israeli prime minister's public declaration about withdrawal to the lines of June 4, 1967. Second was giving a written pledge – similar to the Rabin deposit, and the third, which was the required minimum, was the existence of secret and indirect contacts with Israel, i.e., indirect contacts through a mediating country. Bashar added that “in these negotiations we will define the June 4 lines on the map, and it is clear that all our land must be returned.”<sup>533</sup> The tone of the speech clearly reflected the self-confidence of Bashar Asad aware of the new balance of power in the region that would allow Syria to negotiate with Israel from a position of strength.

Bashar Asad's moment of truth arrived when IAF jets launched a surprise attack at northern Syria on September 6, 2007, penetrating deep into Syrian airspace and attacked a nuclear facility in the northeastern part of the country, against the above mentioned increased tension between Syria and Israel in the post-2006 war process.<sup>534</sup> The attack came to be the most formative event in Israeli-Syrian relations in the 2000's. First, the attack led Israel to compel Bashar Asad to recognize that the war in Lebanon had not changed the strategic balance as much as he believed. In other words, the attack restored the status quo ante in Syrian-Israeli relations. Second, besides its military advance deep into Syrian territory, Israel also won against Syria diplomatically by focusing international attention on Syrian nuclear intentions. Third, it was exposed that Bashar was

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533 Zisser, “It's a Long road to Peace with Syria”, pp. 113-120

534 The attack was leaked by the US in May 2008, Israel objected to disclosure due to the Turkish mediated peace talks with Syria. (2008) 'Syria's secret reactor', Strategic Comments, Volume 14, No: 5, pp. 1-2

ready to drag his country into a nuclear adventure that could have brought him to the brink of a confrontation with Israel, the United States, and the greater international community. Fourth, the raid revealed Bashar's strategic weakness and his posturing to be just rhetoric to Syrians, as well as to wider Arab community.

As the time passed, Syria refrained from reacting. In an interview following the watershed in Syrian-Israeli relations Bashar Asad outlined almost all the corners of Bashar's policy towards Israel. The Syrian leader told the BBC, "When we say to respond or to repay [Israel for its aggression], we do not necessarily mean to send a missile for every missile or a bomb for every bomb. We have our own ways of responding, for example, a political response, or perhaps a response by other means and in other ways. It is clear that it is our right to respond, but if we respond militarily, then we will be acting in accord with the Israeli agenda, which we are not interested in doing."<sup>535</sup>

While his inaction endangered the image he sought to sell, Bashar's display of self control and not retaliation, bought him some largely justified credit for the restraint he displayed as a sign of political maturity. The September 6 attack seemed to have affected Syria's decision to participate in the Annapolis peace conference- the Bush Administration's effort to leave his mark on the Middle East peace process in its final year in November 2007, albeit at low political levels.<sup>536</sup>

Syria maintained to not react and even to not blame Israel following the assassinations of Hezbollah military commander Imad Mughniyah on February 12, 2008 in the heart of Damascus, and Muhammad Suleiman, Bashar al-Asad's close military advisor, in the Syrian coastal town of Tartus on August 1, 2008.<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Eyal Zisser, "An Israeli Watershed Strike on Syria" *ibid*.

<sup>536</sup> Rabinovich, "Syria at crossroads Syria at a Crossroads, p. 96

<sup>537</sup> Zisser, "It's a Long road to Peace with Syria", p. 108

That is to say, September 6, 2007 became the turning point in Syrian foreign policy towards Israel, that led Bashar to adopt a more realistic, self-restrained and pragmatic line. Throughout 2008, Bashar Asad managed to repair his image destroyed by the disclosure of the nuclear activities through his cautious and accommodative attitudes and become a sought-after player on the regional and international scene. The positive contribution by the Syrians made towards achieving the Doha Agreement at the end of May 2008, which led to a temporary relaxation of tensions in Lebanon, was the first step in this regard.<sup>538</sup>

The post-2006 turmoil reached a high point at the beginning of May 2008, when Hizballah took control of West Beirut, the stronghold of the Sunni community, and threatened to engulf Lebanon in a new civil war. Many in Israel, Europe and the US began to think of Syria as a factor that could stabilize the situation in Lebanon as in the Hafez Asad era. This meant for Syria that its post-withdrawal strategy, tightening the alliance with Hezbollah and Iran risking the international isolation and criticism would finally pay off. As soon as Syria showed a readiness to play a positive role in calming the Lebanese crisis, even though it did so in such a way as to strengthen its own position and influence in that country, the European boycott on Syria was removed. The Syrians then gave their blessing to the signing of the Doha Agreement at the end of May 2008-envisaged the formation of a national unity government in which Hezbollah had a veto over policy and the election of a neutral (if not pro-Syrian, pro-Hezbollah) President, Michel Suleiman.<sup>539</sup>

The incident showed that Bashar Asad proved to be successful at using decades of Syrian experience of Lebanese politics, and at following his father's proxy strategy -from all segments in Lebanon, hence to manipulate the situation in

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<sup>538</sup> Lensch, p. 77

<sup>539</sup> Nicholas Blanford, "Syria and the Waiting Game", January 07, 2010, <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/inside.php?id=1224>

Lebanon with consummate skill.<sup>540</sup> Herein it is worth to mention that the opportunity to play this role and keep Lebanon under control arrived at Bashar's alliance formation strategy, another legacy from Hafez Asad. Syria made up a limited alliance that Bashar made with the US through using the improved relations with Turkey in 2008, illustrated by the cooperation along the Iraqi border to prevent the infiltration of fighters into Iraq from Syrian territory.<sup>541</sup>

As a result, Syria obtained further relief from a serious investigation of the Hariri assassination and further tacit international acceptance of its dual role as a member of the Iranian dominated –axis of resistance- and a potential fixer of the damage inflicted by that axis,<sup>542</sup> albeit at the cost of recognizing Lebanon's legitimacy and sovereignty by establishing diplomatic relations in October 2008.<sup>543</sup> That is to say as in the case of Alexandretta, due to the fostering pragmatic relations with Turkey, although many Syrians continued to see Lebanon as a French colonial construct, Bashar Asad has given up the hidden claim over Lebanon as part of their ideological premise of Syrian nationalism-Greater Syria. At the same time, however Syria has not stopped exerting political influence in Lebanese politics<sup>544</sup> through Hezbollah in line with its post-withdrawal strategy, knowing that it needs the organization's asymmetric guerrilla qualities due to lack of military parity with Israel- a view strengthened following Israel's hit and disclosure of Syrian nuclear attempt. Bashar Asad strategy on Lebanon illustrated the shift in his foreign policy toward Israel from ideological to pragmatic politics.

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540 Ibid.

541 Cal Perry, "Syria: We're thwarting militants along Iraq border", *CNN News*, July 4, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/07/04/syria.iraq.border/index.html>

542 Rabinovich, "Syria at crossroads Syria at a Crossroads, p. 98

543 Ian Black, "Syria to open embassy in Beirut after historic decree", *The Guardian*, October 15, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/15/syria-lebanon>

544 "Hariri: Scuds story similar to US claims of Iraq WMDs", *Daily Star*, April, 21, 2010, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/Apr/21/Hariri-Scuds-story-similar-to-US-claims-of-Iraq-WMDs.ashx>



The second development was the renewal of peace talks with Israel in May 2008, albeit indirect, through the mediation of Turkey. In April 2008, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert sent a message to the Syrian president via Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in which he said he was ready to commit himself to the “Rabin deposit.” After Sharon fell ill in 2006, Ehud Olmert, as acting and then as the elected prime minister, initially followed Sharon’s Syria policy. But in February 2007, Olmert changed course, agreeing to Israeli- Syrian talks mediated by Turkey, considering that the balance of Israel’s relations with Hizbollah and Syria was restored following the 6 September 2007 attack, and taking courage from rising international credit for Syria, he concluded that it was time to advance the political process with Syria based on the belief that this could contribute to severing the ties between Tehran and Damascus, and in any case harm Hizbollah.<sup>545</sup> As the secret talks began to pick up steam in mid-2008, both sides had an interest in going public. On May 21, 2008, Olmert made a dramatic announcement in the Knesset about the renewal of peace talks between Israel and Syria.<sup>546</sup>

On the Syrian side, Damascus was interested in publicizing the indirect negotiations in order to break out of the isolation into which the Bush administration had been seeking to push it.<sup>547</sup> Namely, Syria sought to use its good terms with Turkey in order to reach out to Israel, thereby to the new US administration. Therefore Syrians did not lose time to publicize Olmert’s offer. Syrians also wanted to preempt the possibility of a leak by the Israeli media, thus not to find itself in a defensive position and be perceived as being in a hurry to sign a peace agreement with Israel from a position of weakness. In addition it is possible that the Syrians tried to assess Olmert’s seriousness and his potential ability to gain public approval for such a move. Namely, like his father, Bashar

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<sup>545</sup> Zisser, “It’s a Long road to Peace with Syria”, pp. 113-120

<sup>546</sup> Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 351

<sup>547</sup> Rabinovich, “How To Talk And How Not To Talk To Syria: Assessing The Obstacles To And Opportunities In A Future Israeli-Syrian-American Peace Negotiation”, p. 3

did not display any willingness to help Israeli prime minister gain public approval for a peace process with Syria.

Furthermore Zisser argues that Bashar was not determined enough for dramatic and groundbreaking moves and in fact making peace with Israel was beyond his capability including creative and proactive thinking and a correct understanding of Israel's internal reality. Yet Bashar expressed a willingness to reach a peace settlement with Israel, and it appears that this willingness was backed by a wide consensus within the Syrian public.<sup>548</sup>

Many details of the negotiations remain unknown, Israel and Syria have held four rounds of indirect talks under Turkish mediation during which Syria sought full return of the Golan Heights and Israel has linked a peace agreement to Syria distancing itself from Iran and severing ties with Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Palestinian group Hamas. Importantly Olmert, apparently, found his own way of conveying the equivalent of Rabin's "deposit." Yet, the Syrian negotiators attempted to garner a more formal, binding commitment from Israel regarding withdrawal to the line of June 4, 1967. Additionally, Israel reiterated its longstanding demand for normalized relations and security arrangements.<sup>549</sup> The last round of the negotiations was held on July 30, 2008. On the same day Ehud Olmert's announcing, that he would not be a candidate for the position of prime minister in the next elections, effectively ended the talks. Syria officially suspended the indirect talks during the Israeli assault on in December 2008.

An overall assessment of the indirect peace negotiations between Syria and Israel suggests that the change in Israel's position introduced a paradigm shift in the contours of an Israeli-Syrian peace deal. Israel replaced "land for peace" with "land for peace plus strategic realignment", that is Syria's distancing from Iran,

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548 Zisser, Zisser, "It's a Long road to Peace with Syria", pp. 113-120

549 Rabinovich, "How To Talk And How Not To Talk To Syria: Assessing The Obstacles To And Opportunities In A Future Israeli-Syrian-American Peace Negotiation, p. 3

Hizbollah, and the rejectionist organizations came to be a requirement for peace.<sup>550</sup>

As for Syrian position during the talks, Syria proved to be adamant that it would not comply with Israeli or U.S. demands to alter their regional policies as prerequisites to talks. In Syria's thinking to get Israel and the U.S. to engage with itself and take account of its needs, Syria had to play with its cards. Syrians also point out that Israel was putting forward preconditions at a time when Syria has agreed not to impose its own, such as withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territories – as a requirement for resumed negotiations.<sup>551</sup> Thus Damascus' attitude regarding the talks exhibited that Damascus has not had any real hunger for peace or shown determination to reach a settlement. Syria has not shown willingness to commit clearly and unambiguously to distancing itself from Iran and Hizbollah. At most it has been hinted that Damascus would be willing to cool these ties, which one might assume would in any event occur once Syria signed a peace treaty with Israel. Moreover the Syrians continued to stand firm and refuse to take any confidence-building steps that could convince the Israeli public that their desire for peace is sincere, as Bashar's avoidance to meet fellow participant Ehud Olmert, as well as shaking his hand in Paris in July 2008 at the Union for the Mediterranean Summit illustrated.<sup>552</sup>

In this context the interview given by Bashar al- Asad to al-Jazeera on July 14, 2008, should be mentioned, in which he explained:

From our point of view, the word 'normalization' does not exist. We have talked about normal relations (*aadiya*) from the start of the peace process. What is meant by normal relations? This means relations like those that exist between two countries. There are embassies, there are relations, there are agreements. Relations can deteriorate and alternatively they can

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550 Rabinovich, "Syria at crossroads Syria at a Crossroads", p. 96

551 Syria under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges, International Crisis Group, P. 17

552 Zisser, "It's a Long road to Peace with Syria", pp. 113-120

improve. They can be warm or cold. This relates to the sovereignty of every country. Thus we call these relations normal relations.<sup>553</sup>

This explanation revealed the uncompromising stance of Syria during the negotiations, as well as a setback in comparison to Bashar Asad's opinion on "normal relations" during his peace offers following the downfall of the Iraqi regime.<sup>554</sup>

While the indirect talks failed to produce an Israeli-Syrian agreement, it seemed for the moment Syria was the winner from the renewed dialogue with Israel.<sup>555</sup> Turkey's engagement opened the way for the diplomatic process that brought Syria in from the cold. A simultaneous development that shifted the international power balance in Syria's favor was Chirac's replacement with Sarkozy as the President of France. Sarkozy broke with the US policy of isolating Syria, in line with the general realization in the West that the policy of isolating it was counterproductive. The symbol of this change was his invitation of Bashar to the Paris launch of his new European-Mediterranean union where Syria's accession to the European-Mediterranean partnership was again put on the agenda. In July 2008 Bashar Assad was invited to participate in the inauguration of the "Union for the Mediterranean States".<sup>556</sup> It was during this visit that Assad met with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman and agreed to an exchange of ambassadors between the two countries. The Syrian president went to the summit as a highly desirable guest who enjoyed widespread support.<sup>557</sup>

One month after the EU Summit, Bashar had undertaken an action that was totally in the opposite direction. While the West has condemned Russia's

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<sup>553</sup> Ibid.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

<sup>556</sup> Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus*, p. 353

<sup>557</sup> Zisser, *ibid.* pp. 113-120

"excessive" retaliation, Assad issued a clear message of support for Russia's military crackdown in Georgia. Moreover Asad took the advantage of his scheduled visit to Russia to demand the placement of Russian missiles on Syrian soil. Rabinovich outlines this act as the second major error that Bashar made after "his apparent authorization of the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri"<sup>558</sup> While Bashar's demand let Israel to warn Russia, the latter seemed uninterested<sup>559</sup>, Bashar's move was weathered.

In addition Turkish mediated indirect talks gave the chance to Bashar to confirm the difference between Damascus and Hamas, Hizbollah, or Iran, who are not interested in negotiations with Israel, let alone a political settlement with it. Moreover Syria seemed to have managed to extract from Prime Minister Olmert a commitment to a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, to the lines of June 4, 1967, as a condition for starting indirect dialogue with Israel. Thus, Olmert became the fifth Israeli prime minister – preceded by Rabin, Peres, Netanyahu, and Barak – who committed himself to Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. This commitment was to be presented to any future Israeli prime minister seeking to renew negotiations with Syria. All this was without Syria having given Israel anything in return, since Syria has not severed ties with Iran, stopped supplying arms to Hizbollah, or tempered its hostile attitude towards Israel.<sup>560</sup>

Following the halt of the talks, Syria's foreign minister chose Tehran for his explanation of Syria's position on the peace process. Standing next to Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, Walid Al Moallem said that, "If Israel is serious and wants peace, it knows what is required to resume the peace talks". A

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558 David B. Green, "A conversation with Itamar Rabinovich", *Ha'aretz*, December 09, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/a-conversation-with-itamar-rabinovich-1.259170>

559 "Israel warns Russia over weapons sale to Syria", *The Daily Telegraph*, August, 21, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/2597515/Israel-warns-Russia-over-weapons-sale-to-Syria.html>

560 Zisser *ibid*.

few days later, Damascus sent its defense minister to Tehran in a highly publicized visit to bolster military cooperation between the two countries; another sign that Syria would not sacrifice its ties with Tehran in exchange for promises to return the Golan Heights.<sup>561</sup>

In sum Syria did not get the Golan back or the talks did not bear any tangible for the resumption of the peace process was not in sight, but Syria was content with the status quo. Namel, once again the “process” rather than the “result” proved to be the main denominator of Syrian-Israeli relations. Syria augmented its position vis a vis Israel and gained regional, as well as international legitimacy, fostering the ties with Europe, Turkey, Lebanon and at the same time not forgiving the ties with Iran. Importantly, the US knew that the regime in Damascus was there to stay; they needed it for stability in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, as well as for their eventual withdrawal from Iraq.<sup>562</sup>

The election of Obama as the new US President at the beginning of 2009 came at a time Syria mostly repositioned itself from almost complete rupture and isolation. Nevertheless, the new American administration that exchanged “rogue state” and “axis of evil” labels from Washington’s lexicon with a discourse of multilateralism and dialogue,<sup>563</sup> raised hopes on the side of the Syrians. The new President was expected to begin his Middle East policy via the “Syrian front”, based on the idea of forming a more peaceful neighborhood for Israel by weakening Iran and Hezbollah through engaging Syria, as recommended by the Iraq Study Group in 2006.<sup>564</sup>

In an interview following Obama’s election, Bashar al-Assad said “The new U.S. government must get seriously involved in the peace process. We must

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561 Marwan al Kabalan, “Syria moves into regional spotlight”, Gulf News, November 12, 2010, <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/syria-moves-into-regional-spotlight-1.710955>

562 Samo, op. cit.

563 Lensch, p. 77

564 Carsten Wieland, “The Gaza war and the Syria-Israel front”, February, 5 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/the-gaza-war-and-the-syria-israel-front>

help, together with the Europeans"<sup>565</sup> He added, however, that Syria would put its own interests first. "Good relations with Washington should not mean bad relations with Tehran," Landis indicates that Syria did not want to be left out in any emerging Obama peace plan, however this did not mean that Syrian authorities would give Obama what they refused to give Bush. Rather Syria was eager to come to an understanding with the US that recognized its long-term interests.<sup>566</sup>

According to Ma'oz Syria had to be assured that under a peace treaty with Israel it would retrieve the entire Golan Heights (and the Shebaa farms) and receive massive financial aid from the US and Saudi Arabia (and other Arab Gulf states). Damascus was also likely to request these parties' tacit approval for its role as power broker in Lebanon. This was intended at least in part to contain Hizballah's military power and encourage it instead to constructively participate in Lebanese politics and society alongside other local groups. Maoz further states that, as Bashar stated in the above mentioned interview, Damascus would reject any precondition requiring it to sever its strategic-military alliance with Tehran, causing it discard the regional maneuverability and strategic umbrella Iran provides it vis-a-vis Israeli's military superiority.<sup>567</sup>

Contrary to the expectations, soon after assumption of power, Obama shifted his Middle East policy on Palestinian-Israeli orbit because of the Gaza War. The election of hard-right Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu following the war, in February 2009 constituted an obstacle in the likelihood of resuming Syrian-Israeli negotiations.<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>565</sup>" Syria's Assad ready to cooperate with Obama: report" , January, 19, 2009, *Der Spiegel*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/01/18/us-syria-assad-idUSTRE50G1Q120090118>

<sup>566</sup> Joshua Landis, "The Mitchell Visit: Why it is important", June 10, 2009, [www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=3282](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=3282)

<sup>567</sup> Moshe Ma'oz, "Implications for Israel", January 07, 2010, <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/inside.php?id=1222>

<sup>568</sup> [Wieland](#), op. cit.

Nevertheless Syria, rather than getting involved in the war on the side of Hamas, sought to capitalize on Israel's failure to crush Hamas to enhance its regional clout in peace talks with Israel, as well as forging good ties with the new U.S. administration. Several Syrian officials have indicated that the international community would need Syria's help if it wished to engage rather than shun Hamas, which was proved to be political force due to its stiff resistance against Israel during the war. As Landis points out, Gaza war benefited Syria by renewing international awareness that the Arab-Israeli conflict is crucial to any broader Middle East settlement, and Obama had to engage Syria in order to attenuate regional divisions and radicalism.<sup>569</sup> Another benefit of the Gaza war was elevating Syrian-Turkish ties to a strategic level as Damascus's concerns over Turkey's military ties with Israel have all but vanished.<sup>570</sup>

An extra gain of Syria from the Gaza War became the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, who was convinced to extend a hand to Assad in order to confront what were perceived as the real problems in the region- Israel, as well as Iran.<sup>571</sup> Saudi Arabia's gesture was unquestionably also based on a careful reading of the new American administration's mending fences with Assad.<sup>572</sup> The rapprochement with Saudi Arabia brought by another important development; Saad Hariri's visit to Damascus, 6 months after he won the elections against Hezbollah in December 2009, as the final act ending Syria's isolation.<sup>573</sup> Samo comments that the Hariri trip to Damascus was an admission by the Lebanese leader that Lebanon falls within the Syrian sphere of influence and that relations

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569 Joshua Landis, "Will Syria benefit from Israel's invasion in Gaza?", January 21, 2009, [www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=2012](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=2012)

570 Kabalan, op. cit.

571 Abdel-Kader op. cit.

572 Ian Black, "Syria rolls out red carpet as Saudi king flies in to kiss and make up", *The Guardian*, October, 7, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/07/syria-saudi-arabia-meeting>

573 From Isolation to Center Stage, Nizar Abdel-Kader



between the two states are asymmetrical, irrespective of the existence of a Syrian military presence in Lebanon.<sup>574</sup>

According to Ma'oz, Asad through his entente with the moderate axis in the region aimed at diversifying his regional alliances. Hence, apart from seeking to renew indirect talks with Israel under Turkish auspices, Syria could now use Saudi good offices in convincing Washington to mediate a peace deal between Damascus and Jerusalem. Concurrently, Assad could exploit the alliance with Iran and Hezbollah to signal to Israel that he had military options. In effect as the positive chance provided by Obama remained limited due to the Netanyahu administration, Bashar saw its cards Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas as critically valuable for an effort to convince Israel for peace negotiations, which Damascus could conduct from a position of strength.<sup>575</sup>

In October 2009, the EU unanimously agreed that they wish to sign the EU-Syria Association Agreement. However Syria that became a central player in the region, refused to sign the agreement as it no longer needed to risk the domestic instability that would result from accelerating liberal market reforms as required by the provisions in the agreement.<sup>576</sup>

This also was true for Syria's position on peace. Mitchell the Special Envoy to the Middle East visited Damascus in June and July 2009 to discuss the prospects for comprehensive regional peace, including an Israel-Syria treaty. Syria insisted that it would be willing to return to indirect talks under Turkish auspices if Israel committed to withdraw to June 1967 line as a basis for eventual direct talks. On the contrary Israel, because of the deteriorating relations with Turkey, preferred US mediated direct talks, focusing not only on territory, but also on the

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574 Samo, op. cit.

575 Abdel-Kader, *ibid.*

576 Francesco Cavatorta, "EU-Syria relations in Bashar al-Assad's era", *Near East Quarterly*, Issue 9, December 2012, <http://www.neareastquarterly.com/index.php/2011/02/27/eu-syria-relations-in-bashar-al-assads-era/>

Iran-Hizballah angle.<sup>577</sup> This disagreement has blocked the resumption of the negotiations throughout 2009 and 2010.

Although Syria knew that the US was the only country to convince and lead a change in Israeli position regarding peace, the Obama administration could not meet Syrian expectations to be a just broker due to not applying adequate pressure on Israel. On the other hand Syria saw Turkey as an objective facilitator, and a regional power that had the capacity to influence the US to take steps favoring Damascus. In addition, Syria's insistence on Turkish mediation was part of its wider regional outlook that struggle with Israel went along with. Syria opted to increase Turkey's gravity in the regional and international arena, since Turkey was the actor providing the vital breakouts that Syrian regime needed, thus helping Syria preserve its position in the regional mainstream.

Conversely 2010 had begun with an increasing tension along the Israel's southern border with Lebanon was once again on the agenda. In February 2010 Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri complained about the Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace during the last two months.<sup>578</sup> Israel, in response, put forward that Syria was delivering Scud missiles to Hezbollah. The resulting war of words paved the way for the worries of a third Lebanon or another regional war.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud said that alternative to opening negotiations with Syria could be the outbreak of war, which was perceived by the Syrian leadership as a threat. In response, during a visit to Damascus by Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos, the then EU President, Asad said "Israel is not serious about achieving peace, since all the facts show that she is pushing the region toward war, not peace."<sup>579</sup> Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem took the point

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577 Andrew Tabler, "Can the U.S. Revive Israeli-Syrian Peace Talks?", September 29, 2010, [http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2010/09/29/can\\_the\\_us\\_revive\\_israeli-syrian\\_peace\\_talks\\_99205.html](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2010/09/29/can_the_us_revive_israeli-syrian_peace_talks_99205.html)

578 "Lebanese PM warns of escalating Israeli war threats", *Middle East Online*, February 10, 2010, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=37131>

579 Roe Nahmias, "Assad: Israel pushing region towards war", March, 2, 2010, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3844111,00.html>

further, and stated that this time war would be a total war reaching out Israeli cities. In answer, his Israeli counterpart Lieberman warned Syria that if a war broke out, Israel's goal would be nothing short of the collapse of the Asad dynasty. Netanyahu lowered the tone of the dispute, declaring that Israel was still interested in negotiating peace with Syria "without preconditions", and open to the mediation of a "fair third party" – not Turkey.

The tension was downgraded when Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri said that Syria did not channel Scud missiles into Lebanon. The US, as well, declared that there was no proof that complete missiles were delivered to Hezbollah. The incident exhibited Syria's strengthened regional and international position in comparison to the pre-Second Lebanon war period when Syria was sanctioned and isolated by the international community.

On February 25, 2010 Asad hosted a solidarity meeting in Damascus with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, not to pay attention to the American advice to move away from its "deeply troubling" relationship with Iran given the day before the trilateral meeting.<sup>580</sup> Syria, managed to position itself between two networks, through the agility in its foreign policy during 2008, was signaling both to the US and Israel, that had its interests were ignored or respected Syria could tilt one way or the other.

In Spring 2010, the Netanyahu government became even less willing to renew talks with Damascus as President Shimon Peres accused Syria of sending Hezbollah long-range Scuds. In response, the Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem expressed that Israel aimed to raise tension further in the region and to create an atmosphere for probable Israeli aggression. The American concern spurred further official visits to Damascus.<sup>581</sup> Since then, reports have surfaced, that Iran has

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580 Patrick Goodenough, "After Years of Engagement with Syria, U.S. Now Considering Sanctions, April 27, 2011, Cns News, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/after-years-engagement-syria-us-now-considering-sanctions>

581 "Syria: Israel's Scud accusation may be pretense for attack", *Ha'aretz*, April 15, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/syria-israel-s-scud-accusation-may-be-pretense-for-attack-1.284315>

transferred radar systems to Syria that could facilitate Hizballah operations against Israeli aircraft,<sup>582</sup> both Damascus and Tehran denied. In addition, in September 2010, despite Israeli concerns, Syria purchased P-800 anti-ship missiles from Russia, an advanced system that also can be used against land targets.<sup>583</sup>

In July 2010 Bashar Asad and Saudi King Abdallah visited Beirut together in order to calm the tensions in Lebanon and overcome divisions over Palestinian-Israeli peace talks. The visit led Syria once again give the message to Israel and to the US that stability cannot prevail in Lebanon in the absence of Syria. In addition the visit hinted that Syria succeeded in preserving the Lebanese card in the regional struggle with Israel. Moreover thanks to the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, Syria without sacrificing the traditional ties with Iran-led axis, moved forward in getting closer with the moderate Arab actors. That is to say the visit to Beirut showed that Bashar Asad took an important step in applying his father's legacy- multi alliance formation.

In September 2010 Israeli and Palestinian direct peace negotiations were resumed in Washington. On September 27 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conferred with her Syrian counterpart Walid Mouallem on the sidelines of a UN meeting in New York, two weeks after U.S. peace envoy George Mitchell's visit to Bashar Asad in Damascus. Tabler remarks that the diplomatic activity was aiming at preventing Syria's spoiling of the renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. To strengthen its hand Washington increasingly focused on how to induce Syria balance its ties with the radical, presented Asad with the prospect a U.S.-led "comprehensive peace" that would include Syria and Lebanon, conditioned on constraining Syrian-based Palestinian rejectionist groups. Following the meeting with Hillary Clinton, in an interview Foreign Minister

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582“ 'Iran arms Syria with radar,' US report says”, *BBC News*, July 1, 2010  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10473515>

583 Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu: We tried and failed to stop Russian missile sale to Syria”, *Ha'aretz*, Sep.19, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/netanyahu-we-tried-and-failed-to-stop-russian-missile-sale-to-syria-1.314624>

Mouallem downplayed the prospects of renewed talks with Israel and voiced opposition to many of Washington's regional initiatives.<sup>584</sup>

Despite the enhanced bilateral dialogue, Syria has voiced frustration at the slow pace of progress on the grounds that Obama has not exerted enough pressure on Israel to renew the peace process. Syrian officials have also expressed disappointment that the US president renewed economic sanctions imposed on the country by the former Bush administration. Damascus feared that Washington intended to push Syria forward on the Iraq and Lebanon issues, which are relatively easy to resolve, without committing itself to including Syria in the Obama peace plan or to getting the Golan restored, which was much more difficult. After all, in Syria's eyes the sanctions which weigh on Syria were a result of its on-going struggle with Israel, namely to retrieve its right to the Golan. From this perspective Syria rejected contention that it somehow has to "prove" itself a worthy partner.<sup>585</sup>

On the other side, the Israeli daily *Yediot Ahronot* revealed that during the spring of 2010 Syria and Israel Netanyahu conducted secret indirect talks brokered by the Frederic Hoff, then special coordinator for Lebanon and Syria, and Dennis B. Ross, then a special assistant to President Obama on the Middle East. Accordingly to the report appeared in October 2012 Netanyahu promised to return to the June 4, 1967, in exchange for not an explicit commitment from Assad, but an expectation of Damascus's severing ties with Tehran. The sides did not agree on a timeline for the Israeli withdrawal, as Syria wanted the agreement to be implemented within one and a half to two years, while Israel asked for more time before pulling out of the region. However Netanyahu's office denied the initiative, singling it out as one of many proposed American attempt to Israel over the past few years.<sup>586</sup> Nonetheless the negotiations were reported to be interrupted by uprising against Syrian president in March 2011, whether the initiative would

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584Tabler, op cit..

585 Abdel-Kader, op. cit.

586 Shimon Shiffer, "Report: Netanyahu agreed to full Golan Heights withdrawal", *Yediot Ahronot*, December 12, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4291337,00.html>

have likely ended with an agreement had they not been interrupted by the uprising against Assad remained unknown.

In conclusion, as a leader from the new generation who was politically socialized in a different way than the previous leaders of Syria, Bashar Asad, taking the advantage of inheriting a strong state surrounded by favorable regional and international contexts, initially sought to bring changes to Syrian foreign policy towards Israel. Adhering to the diplomatic option, in line with his wider vision for Syria's Western-centric foreign policy axis, upon assumption of power, he declared his will to revitalize the stalled peace process, if Israel acknowledged what Syria took to be the commitment made under Yitzhak Rabin to a full withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders on the Golan Heights. However as he faced extreme pressure of a series of domestic, regional and international challenges, Bashar Asad called back the foreign policy trends, rather than introducing any change.

During his initial years in power, due to the threatening from the domestic environment, Bashar Asad heightened the antagonism in his discourse against Israel, as well as providing Hezbollah with advanced arms and hosting the Hamas and Islamic Jihad headquarters in Damascus. However as the international environment became more threatening, i.e. ratification of the US sanctions against Syria following Israel's deepest raid into the country since 1973 in October 2003, and preparations to wage war against Iraq, Bashar Asad sought to come to terms with the challenging regional and international circumstances that put Syria in almost complete isolation following the withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. In response on the one hand Bashar Asad continued to reiterate his desire to renew official peace negotiations with Israel with no preconditions under American auspices, on the other hand continuing the proxy war in Lebanon via Hezbollah and the alliance with Iran, in order to enable Syria to negotiate from position of strength. In addition he opted to diversify the regional alliances via the alliance with Turkey, in order to have many cards at the same time on the table against Israel. That is to say Bashar Asad worked out to reposition Syria more favorably

within the political matrix in the face of the regional and international challenges by using the father's tools such as relentless peace offers and negotiations, multiple alliance formation, and the proxy card as explained in Chapter 4.

By the second half of Bashar Asad's presidency the three levels began to present more favorable conditions for the pragmatic conduct of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel. On the domestic level, by May 27, 2007, Bashar al-Assad survived seven years in power as he made use of the isolation years to concentrate on the domestic front to consolidate his rule in a way provide considerable autonomy in foreign policy making. On the regional level the Second Lebanon War, Turkish-mediated peace talks with Israel in mid-2008, the political crisis in Lebanon which restored Syria's political role in Lebanon, Gaza War, reconciliation with Saudi Arabia were the developments that Syria made use of to ensure a come back to the mainstream regional politics. On the international level, rising voices from the EU, especially from France under new Chirac presidency and US based on the failure in Iraq that admits constructive engagement with Syria and subsequent election of Obama administration removed the international pressure on Syria to a considerable extent. Hence Bashar Asad in the second half of his presidency proved to have considerable talent to reposition Syria more favorably within the political matrix given the challenges posed by the three levels in a pragmatic manner. For instance, in response to the September 2007 Israeli attack, contrary to his response to the previous Israeli attacks, Bashar Asad adopted a more realistic, self-restrained and pragmatic line. Thus throughout 2008, Bashar Asad through cautious and accommodative attitudes and become a sought-after player on the regional and international scene. Hence by 2009 the implication of the relatively favorable conditions in the three levels in comparison to the Bashar Asad's first years in power on the Syrian foreign policy towards Israel came in the form of a loss of relative interest in resuming the negotiations throughout 2009 and 2010 that were broken down following the Gaza War. Having weathered the storms of the decade, Syria felt at the center of events in the region, and reestablished itself before Israel, as well as the US. This confidence

would lead Bashar Asad to claim that Syria would prove to be immune to the newly emerging regional challenge, the so-called Arab Spring in late 2010.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION**

As demonstrated in the preceding chapters, the challenges and opportunities coming from three interlinked and interacting environments, the domestic, regional and international, provide the framework in shaping Syrian Foreign Policy towards Israel. In each period that this study has examined, one of the levels was observed to be more determinative than the other two. Chapter 2 that outlined the historical background that was shaped between the late Ottoman period and the establishment of the Syrian state in 1946 explains the roots of the effect of the levels to Syrian Foreign Policy towards Israel.

The modern Syrian state came into existence neither for geographic or cultural reasons, nor because of actions taken by its inhabitants, but to serve external powers' interests. The external imposition of state boundaries which fragmented historic Syria brought an unstable political life, and a weak national identity due to Syrian state's lack of roots and historical legitimacy. Hence, the pre-independence rulers pursued shifting policies due to certain factors like the pressures from external and internal environments, and their vested interests that attached to the maintenance of the status quo. These patterns had been transferred to the foreign policy of the modern Syrian state, and Syria established a course of following an inconstant policy towards Israel depending on the ever changing three 3 levels.

When Syria embarked upon its career as an independent state, soon found itself besieged with a set of problems, both internal and external. As the priority of Syria's post independence leaders was to integrate Syrians into a unified society in order to form a national political community, the weakness of the Syrian body politic both made it necessary for both the regional and international actors to struggle for control over the country and impossible for any of them to win the

contest.<sup>587</sup> As the Cold War provided the opportunity for the Syrian governments to rally between the two blocs, the first set of Syrian foreign policy decisions on the policy towards Israel were made mostly by taking the regional (inter-Arab) and domestic dynamics into consideration.

During Hafez Asad era, the state's consolidation was completed, Israel was seen as the key geopolitical rival of Syria in the Middle East- Syria's geopolitical battleground, rather than an ideological enemy, and portrayed as the gravest threat to the country in the struggle against which all the tools are relevant to apply. That is to say, between 1970 and 2000 Syrian foreign policy towards Israel emphasized the regional dynamics over the domestic ones. However, Hafez Asad had never lost sight of the international context within which the struggle for the Middle East was embedded, knowing that Syria could neither fight nor make peace with Israel without superpower involvement. Manipulating regional and international alliances regardless of ideology were primary tools of Asad, as Syria alone lacked the sources to sustain his policy.

In the 2000's, after consolidating his rule in a way to free himself from the domestic constraints, Bashar Asad conducted the policy towards Israel primarily with regard to the regional level factors. His approach towards Israel was an inheritance from his father- the idea that the Middle East is Syria's geopolitical battleground in which the struggle is to enhance Syria's strategic position vis a vis Israel- not only the occupier on the Golan Heights, but also the key geopolitical rival of Syria. As he proved to be successful in repositioning Syria in the regional political matrix vis a vis Israel, the international environment, i. e. the effect of the stance of the US on Syria lost its relative importance on Syria's policy conduct towards Israel.

This thesis also concluded that Israel has a core, indeed mutually reinforcing place in Syrian foreign policy configuration. That is to say despite the

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587 Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A study in Post-War Arab Politics 1945-1958*, (Yale University Press, 1987), p. xiii

historic Syrian animosity towards Israel, which used to be played out to the extent of refusing the existence of the Zionist state, ironically Israel's subsistence has been the main pillar of its overall domestic, as well as foreign policy structure. First and foremost, this was an outcome of Syria's founding state ideology being anti-Zionism, as explained in Chapter 1. Following the establishment of Syrian state, first Arab-Israeli war made route-changing effect on the Syrian politics, as the first coup was waged as an outcome of the war. The war, along with shattering the newly independent state's effort for state building, gave way to the formation of radical political parties, i.e. the Ba'th. In 1967 occupied territory dimension as a constitutive element in Syria's course of state consolidation. Moreover Syria's efforts starting from the Disengagement Agreement in 1973 until now to be integrated to the international mainstream that would have repercussions on its internal political and economic situation was extremely tied to the settlement of Israeli-Syrian conflict. The enduring deadlock in the conflict is the major obstacle in Syria's eyes for its acceptance by the international community, as Syria sees the sanctions which weigh on itself as a result of its ongoing struggle with Israel, namely to retrieve its right to the Golan- the perspective that leads Syria reject the contention that it somehow has to "prove" itself a worthy partner in order to resume the peace talks.

This thesis discussed the place of retaking the Golan Heights, whether it has been the cornerstone of Syrian foreign policy towards Israel as it is assumed or the negotiations were used to increase Syria's standing in the eyes of the US, as well as to boost the ideological legitimacy as the Arab voice against Israel and to divert domestic problems. The thesis came up with the conclusion that firstly both Hafez Asad and Bashar, as they consolidated their leadership both at home and in the region, thus no more needed groundbreaking success in the short run. Second, both Asads offered routine (*adiyya*) relations to Israel, which could be warm or cold, but not normal (*tabi'yya*) relations, which means even at time of peace Syria would find enough arguments to keep the image of the external enemy alive in order to divert attention from problems of its own, such as Hafez Asad did by arguing that Israel did not fully withdraw from Lebanon pointing at the remaining

occupation of the Shebaa farms at the border. Bashar Asad could act in a similar way capitalizing on the unresolved conflict with the Palestinians.

Therefore this study found out that both approached the return of the Golan Heights within a wider geopolitical perspective. Although Syria aimed to secure US will through negotiations, on the domestic level, for the regime to absorb the shock waves, considering Syrian society's and political system's vulnerability the peace had to be achieved in a way to restore the national dignity. The regional account suggested that the ultimate aim of both Asads' foreign policy has been keeping Syria's central place in the mainstream of the regional power with its bargaining card on tact as a deterrent force against the potential regional threats inherent in the state-formation process as explained in Chapter 2. Thus although peace offers and negotiations have been one of the cards against Israel, both Asads did not only aim to get back all of the Golan, but also to preserve for Syria a regional role in the post-peace Middle East that would make it possible for the Syrians not to live constantly in the shadow of Israeli power.

For the last three decades, since Hafez Asad suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982, the Baath regime in Syria had been considered as the most stable regime in the Middle East. Bashar Asad had not faced any significant domestic opposition during his 11 years on power as he consolidated his grip on the country, especially during the second half of his reign, which led him pursue an autonomous foreign policy towards Israel.

When the wave of protest engulfing the Middle East and causing the collapse of the Arab regimes in Tunisia and Egypt started in late 2010, Syrian President Bashar Asad initially was assured that the wave of Arab uprisings would bypass Syria. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal on January 31, 2011 he stated that "Syria is not Egypt or Tunisia"<sup>588</sup>. According to Zisser, Asad's

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<sup>588</sup> "Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad", The Wall Street Journal, January 31, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html>

confidence rested on the support of Syrians thanks to its strong anti-Israeli and anti-American stance.<sup>589</sup>

However, on March 18 the fire that Bashar Asad could not extinguish so far, spread to Syria, too. Since that time the regime focused on eliminating the fatal challenge to its survival- which came to be the main determinant of Syrian foreign policy behavior towards Israel. As the situation in Syria prolonged and got increasingly violent, Syria started to face the deepest regional and international isolation, while the regional and international actors declared support to Syrian opposition. In line with this threatening atmosphere in all 3 levels, starting from March 30, 2011, Asad laid the blame for the domestic unrest in Syria on an Israeli plot incited by the West and certain Arab states.<sup>590</sup>

Despite Syria's efforts to get Israel involved in the crisis by trying to prove the existence of a link between the domestic unrest and Israel, the latter on the other hand, has preferred to watch Syria from the sidelines. The reason being, as explained in this thesis, Syrian foreign policy under Bashar Asad has followed a continuous line, and that means the threat to Asad regime's survival is also a concern for Israel, as it carries the potential of leaving Israel with an unknown enemy on its northern border. The interruption of the silence on the Golan border, which has been quiet since 1974, is one possible repercussion of the unrest in Syria in Israel's eyes. However, as Zisser maintains, the most crucial question for Israel, namely Israeli red-line regarding the Syrian civil war, is the possibility of Syria's advanced weapons fall into the hands of Asad regime's proxies, first and foremost Hezbollah, which might pave the way for destabilizing Lebanon, as well as increasing Iranian influence in the region.<sup>591</sup> Bashar Asad implied this in an interview on October 29, 2011 by stating that any threat to his rule will unleash an

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<sup>589</sup> Eyal Zisser, "The Syria of Bashar al-Asad: At a Crossroads", *INSS Insight*, No. 249, April 5, 2011, P. 1

<sup>590</sup> "President al-Assad Delivers Speech at People's Assembly", *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, March 30, 2011, <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2011/03/30/339334.htm>

<sup>591</sup> From an e-mail correspondence with Eyal Zisser, July, 12, 2012

earthquake that would burn the Middle East.<sup>592</sup> This threat by Asad is a sign that Syria in the post-March 2011 process has been keeping Syria's regional position, continuing to use the Lebanese card, as well as the Iranian alliance effectively against Israel.

January 31, 2013, as the Israeli leaders concluded that the redline- transfer of advanced weapons systems to Hezbollah seemed to be violated, Israel decided to end its distant watch on Syria. Syria quickly announced and condemned the Israeli raid on a "research center" in a district of Damascus<sup>593</sup>, while Israeli accounts claimed that the attack was launched on a convoy of game-changing ground-to-air missiles that were about to be transferred to Hezbollah and that may have been stationed in that "research center" on their way to Lebanon. Although the Syrian regime made it clear that it will not retaliate, it launched a full-scale propaganda campaign designed to make use of the Israeli attack in line with his efforts from the beginning to portray the civil war as an Israeli plot.<sup>594</sup>

Following the raid, Bashar Asad pointed at Israel as the destabilizing actor in Syria, saying that the raid "unmasked the true role Israel is playing, in collaboration with foreign enemy forces and their agents on Syrian soil, to destabilize and weaken Syria". In addition in a meeting with Saeed Jalili, head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Bashar Asad claimed that his country's military was able to confront "current threats... and aggression".<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>592</sup> Andrew Gilligan, "Assad: challenge Syria at your peril", *The Daily Telegraph*, October 29, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8857898/Assad-challenge-Syria-at-your-peril.html>

<sup>593</sup> "Cabinet.. Israeli Aggression on Research Center Flagrant violation of Sovereignty", *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, January 31, 2011, <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2013/01/31/464915.htm>

<sup>594</sup> "Post-Assad Syria poses new, unknown dangers for Israel", *English Al Ahram Online*, February 5, 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/64103/World/Region/PostAssad-Syria-poses-new,-unknown-dangers-for-Isr.aspx>

<sup>595</sup> "President Assad accuses Israel of destabilising Syria", *BCC News Middle East*, February 3, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21311874>

This came as another expected behavior from Bashar Asad, who continued Syria's policy of inaction against Israeli attacks coupled with a violent rhetoric. Rabinovich highlights one difference between the Asad regime's reaction to September 6, 2007 raid. Accordingly, while Syria did not announce the attack at the time, this time Bashar Asad had every interest in playing up the Israeli attack in order to divert domestic opposition.<sup>596</sup> Apparently the difference between the two responses of the Syrian regime rests on the differences between the domestic, regional and international contexts- being rendering Syria extremely vulnerable to the very survival of the regime unlike the conjuncture in 2007 as explained in Chapter 5.

To conclude this thesis has tried to explain that Syrian foreign policy towards Israel is conducted based on its established determinants that date back to the formative years of the Syrian state filtered from the domestic, regional and international dynamics. It is also interesting to see that despite the grave challenges in the domestic, regional and international environments, since March 2011 the general contour of Syria's foreign policy behavior towards Israel has not displayed any change. Yet in line with the arguments of this thesis, change might be expected in case of alteration in one of the three determinative levels.

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<sup>596</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, "Israel Steps Into Syria", *Foreign Affairs*, February 6, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138829/itamar-rabinovich/israel-steps-into-syria>

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A:

#### The Syrian-Israeli Frontier Relevant Lines: 1923, 1949, 1967<sup>597</sup>



<sup>597</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/67line.html>

**APPENDIX B:**

**TEZ FOTOKOPİSİ İZİN FORMU**

**ENSTİTÜ**

Fen Bilimleri Enstitüsü ☐

Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü ☐

Uygulamalı Matematik Enstitüsü ☐

Enformatik Enstitüsü ☐

Deniz Bilimleri Enstitüsü ☐

**YAZARIN**

Soyadı :  
Adı :  
Bölümü :

**TEZİN ADI** (İngilizce) :

**TEZİN TÜRÜ** : Yüksek Lisans ☐ Doktora ☐

1. Tezimin tamamından kaynak gösterilmek şartıyla fotokopi alınabilir. ☐
2. Tezimin içindekiler sayfası, özet, indeks sayfalarından ve/veya bir bölümünden kaynak gösterilmek şartıyla fotokopi alınabilir. ☐
3. Tezimden bir bir (1) yıl süreyle fotokopi alınamaz. ☐

**TEZİN KÜTÜPHANEYE TESLİM TARİHİ:**