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CENTRE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY
BETWEEN RATIONAL ACTOR AND
REGIME LEGITIMACY

1970 - 1994

Isabelle A. DANEELS

M.A. DISSERTATION

1994

University of Durham

CENTRE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN
AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

Syrian Foreign Policy
between Rational Actor
and Regime Legitimacy
1970 - 1994

Isabelle A. Daneels

1993 - 1994

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28 FEB 2005

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Syrian Foreign Policy
between Rational Actor and Regime Legitimacy
1970 - 1994

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The dissertation is approximately 17.207 words in length.

Durham, 21 september 1994.

Isabelle A. Daneels

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INTRODUCTION

Since President Hafiz al-Asad's seizure of power in 1970, Syria has experienced numerous changes both in its domestic and regional environment, however, over time Syrian foreign policy decision-making has remained consistent. It is the purpose of this study to examine the determinants of Syrian foreign policy between November 1970 and July 1994.

This dissertation will operate from the assumption that Syrian foreign policy has been determined by two main factors and, therefore, will be approached from two perspectives: (i) the struggle against Israel on behalf of Arab nationalist goals and (ii) the need to preserve internal regime legitimacy. The hypothesis of this dissertation asserts that these two aspects have been compatible and were inextricably interlinked between 1970 and 1990. During this period the pursuit of a consistent Arab nationalist foreign policy had become a basic legitimising component for the regime. However, this paper also intends to illustrate that after the emergence of the New World Order and the Kuwait crisis of 1990, the external environment has placed new constraints upon the definition of Arab nationalist goals enforcing a reduction in the Arab nationalist agenda. Consequently, the author will suggest that the basis of internal legitimacy was altered correspondingly, beginning to replace legitimacy based upon consistent Arab nationalist policies with legitimacy based upon the purveyance of economic prosperity.

For the purpose of this paper, the definition of pan-Arabism will be restricted to the Arab-Israeli conflict since with the reluctant acceptance of the regional subsystem of states by nearly all Arab leaders and parties, this conflict has become the main concern of Arab nationalism at the expense of the earlier drive for the unification of the Arab states. Whilst the notion exists beyond this interpretation, there is not sufficient space in this paper to develop the idea further.



Throughout the course of this paper, it is the intention of the author to denote the emergence of a gradual shift in regime legitimacy from Arab nationalism to legitimacy through the provision of economic prosperity. This change can be conceptualised in terms of the basis of legitimacy as defined by Max Weber's typology¹, which will itself be modified and further elaborated for the purposes of this study. When Asad assumed power in 1970, the legitimacy of the regime owed its origins to an ideological thrust. This paper intends to suggest that an evolution has taken place from neo-patrimonial/ideological legitimacy in the 1970s and 1980s to a combination of neo-patrimonial/ideological legitimacy and legal/rational legitimacy after the Gulf War. Asad in this way utilises the many instruments of legitimation at his disposal. By varying the combinations of legitimacy, he has succeeded in maintaining a reservoir of support from his original consistency, whilst successfully engaging the diffuse support of the business community.

To facilitate the presentation of this paper, I have divided it into four principle sections. It should be noted that each section will provide an overview based on secondary sources as well as primary sources collected on a study-trip to Syria in June 1994.

Before assessing the importance of regime legitimacy and its relationship with a consistent Syrian foreign policy, it is necessary to determine which approaches will be utilised and how the study will be considered. Therefore, a theoretical framework is needed and a brief look at the discipline of international relations required. Chapter one will provide a theoretical framework for the proposed area of this study.

Chapter two will concentrate upon the domestic aspect of this study, covering the period from 1970 to the Gulf War. When President Asad gained power in 1970, he inherited a constituency imbued with ideological imperatives. Chapter two will suggest that Asad attempted to broaden his support base partly in order to redefine Arab nationalist goals. This would provide sufficient room for domestic manoeuvring, whilst delivering an ability to pursue a rational foreign policy. Operating through a rationale based on political incentive, namely the need for regime survival; regime stability; and the pursuit of

¹ WEBER, M., The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation, London, William Hodge and Company Limited, 1947.

autonomy, Asad sought to increase his regional standing.

Chapter two will explore how Asad transformed his state from a reformist/revolutionary state to a more bourgeois/bureaucratic one through the introduction of economic and political liberalisation. Whilst this is not a study dedicated to economic and political liberalisation, I have found its applicability essential in attempting to analyse Asad's political orientations. After seizing power, Asad ensured that the Ba'th party disrupted Syria's "natural" civil society and replaced it with a state dependent one. Moreover, Asad was largely responsible for incorporating and subduing the public sector elements whilst reactivating various components of the bourgeoisie. A mixture of statist policies and incremental liberalisation measures has produced a state that can be broadly categorised as "Bonapartist" in form. The main aim of Asad's internal strategy was to achieve autonomy from domestic constraints and interests in order to consolidate the Syrian state. This would allow him to conduct a rational foreign policy in the struggle with Israel.

Chapter three will focus upon the external policies of the Asad regime, running from 1970 to the Gulf conflict of August 1990. This Chapter will indicate that the defeat of 1967, the death of Nasser and the arrival of Hafiz al-Asad marked a shift away from rejectionist strategies and a move towards pragmatism. Asad's realist strategies helped to redefine the concept of pan-Arabism and sought to shape an environment in which an honourable peace settlement according to UN resolution 242 could be achieved.

It is apparent from 1970 that Syria's foreign policy was compatible and consistent with its new conception of pan-Arab aspirations. However, Hafiz al-Asad has displayed flexibility in pursuing these ambitions. His strategy and use of tactics have sometimes appeared to be inconsistent with his pan-Arab objectives, and this has frequently placed Syria within a conflictual scenario with the other Arab states and challenged the regime's legitimacy within Syria. It is therefore essential to distinguish between Syria's policy objectives and the strategy employed to achieve them; the former remained consistent, whilst the latter was marked by maximum flexibility.

Chapter three will illustrate how the adoption of tactics seemingly at odds with Arab nationalism actually served Asad's pursuit of Arab nationalist goals. Asad's consistency in the pursuit of his pragmatic, nationalist goals was necessary to maintain the regime's ideological legitimacy. The flexibility acquired by Asad in pursuing his policy objectives was made possible through the relative autonomy he enjoyed.

Chapter four will examine the impact of the changing international environment, especially the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War, upon Syrian foreign policy. The author of this paper intends to provide an explanation of how the New World Order has gradually diminished the prospect of fulfilling the Arab nationalist goals. The Oslo agreement has contributed to the further division of Arab solidarity and challenged the prospects for comprehensive peace. Chapter four will indicate that Asad, in order to maintain his legitimacy, had to start shifting the basis of regime legitimacy away from Arab nationalism to legitimacy based upon the alleviation of liberal, economic and material impoverishment. The Oslo agreement has provided Asad with an opportunity to reach an honourable peace, but one that is no longer defined by a strict adherence to the comprehensive solution. Although the regime officially continues to strive for a comprehensive peace, a separate peace settlement with Israel over the Golan would no longer damage regime legitimacy as Asad is considered to be a tough negotiator who has been consistent for years and is now struggling to get the best possible deal.

The conclusion will assimilate the threads of this thesis. It will provide an overview of how the documentation on Syria is compatible with the theoretical framework provided by this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1 : THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

If one is to address the relationship between regime legitimacy and foreign policy, it is essential to provide a working definition of legitimacy. This will form the first part of my theoretical framework. In the remaining sectors of this chapter, three models for understanding or explaining foreign policy will be presented and challenged: (i) the rational actor model, (ii) the domestic politics model, and (iii) omnibalancing. The first two models are extreme approaches; omnibalancing provides a compromise between the two extremes. It is the intention of the author to introduce an improved fourth model which is the only model to adequately account for the link between consistency in foreign policy and regime legitimacy in Syria.

1.1 DESCRIPTION AND DEFINITION OF LEGITIMACY

Weber distinguished three types of legitimacy: (i) legal/rational authority², (ii) charismatic authority³, and (iii) traditional authority⁴. In this paper, the following modified version of Weber's legitimacy typology will be utilised in order to understand legitimacy in the Syrian case: (i) legal/rational legitimacy, (ii) ideological legitimacy, and (iii) neo-patrimonial legitimacy. It should be noted that in Syria since 1970, no category by itself has proved to be sufficient in providing a basis to consolidate the regime. Regime legitimacy has always derived from a combination of two or three of these legitimacy types. In the following chapters, this study intends to demonstrate how Asad has combined and altered the legitimacy mix on which his regime is based parallel to developments in foreign policy.

² WEBER, M., o.c., p. 302-312.

³ WEBER, M., o.c., p. 329-333.

⁴ WEBER, M., o.c., p. 313-328.

1.1.1 Legal/rational legitimacy

Legal/rational legitimacy refers to a situation where the ruler is perceived as legitimate because he pursues rational policies or goals, accepts legal procedures, and works through institutions and laws. Rationality can be manifest in two crucial aspects of policymaking. Firstly, governing can be rational essentially in the sense of creating an environment in which economic rationality is fostered and economic development can take place. According to Weber rational economic policies consist of capitalist development. Secondly, legitimacy from rationality can be obtained from the recognition of the public opinion that the political elite pursues realistic and attainable foreign policy goals and is effective in achieving such goals.

Although legal/rational legitimacy in Syria is still is weak, particularly in its legal dimension, one has to take into account the possibility of its gradual growth. Indeed, the civil service, the military, to the significant extent they operate according to the legal/rational norms of bureaucratic organisation have increasingly added rationality to governmental authority. As legal/rational legitimacy increases, the need to protect the economic base of the regime has also pushed it towards pursuit of more rational economic policies. Moreover, the elite has to respond to the fact that in the rational pursuit of goals such as economic development, public opinion increasingly judges the legitimacy of the regime on how well they perform.⁵ In the meanwhile, however, authority of the Syrian regime largely remains dependent upon ideological legitimacy, neo-patrimonial legitimacy or a combination of both.

1.1.2 Ideological legitimacy

Ideological legitimacy implies a leader who is perceived as an exceptional, even charismatic person with a strong ideological mission. In the Arab world, Nasser is the

⁵ HUDSON, M.C., Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy, London, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 24.

classic example, but Hafiz al-Asad's regime can also be considered as partly resting on ideological leadership. Although not to the extent of Nasser, Asad has accounted for much of the Syrian regime legitimacy through his Arab nationalist credentials in foreign policy. Pan-Arab nationalism in foreign policy, this study argues, has been the main component of ideological legitimacy in Syria since 1970. Yet, the more Syrian society has modernised and the social mobilisation process has developed, the more the ideological legitimacy has become vulnerable. As people become more aware of the limits of realising ideological ideals, the appropriateness of ideological legitimacy diminishes.

1.1.3 Neo-patrimonial legitimacy

Neo-patrimonial legitimacy is a variant of Weber's traditional legitimacy developed by Eisenstadt to refer to a traditional-like form of authority -such as tradition of status or from use of patronage- persisting in spite of modernisation. The ruler enjoys the personal support of his followers because they are his personal kin or clients and he is their patron, whose power they support in return for protection or benefits. In Syria, Asad and his coterie have made use of such forms of political cement in their attempt to build up the state. Although symptoms of neo-patrimonial legitimacy still exist, in the long run their public acceptance is declining as society develops and social mobilisation occurs. Eisenstadt describes this stage in the evolution as post-traditional; a condition conducive neither to Weber's traditional legitimacy nor to legal/rational legitimacy.⁶

⁶ HUDSON, M.C., o.c., p. 17.

1.2 MODELS OF FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING

1.2.1 The "rational actor" or "balance of power" model

1.2.1.1 Concept-description

The rational actor model does not consider domestic politics to be of paramount importance in the decision-making process. The leader of a state acts autonomously of internal constraints and is chiefly concerned with the external balance of power. As Ehteshami and Hinnebusch suggest:

"In this model, foreign policy responds almost exclusively to the power struggle in the external environment."⁷

The state, conceived as a unitary actor, pursues rational goals in an attempt to prevent another state or group of states from achieving predominance in the international arena or regional subsystem. Foreign policy decision-making is a realist, not ideologically shaped process, responding to rational criteria and including a consideration of all possible alternatives, of the likelihood of attaining these objectives by the various alternatives under consideration, and of the benefits or costs of each alternative.⁸ In this rational process, decision-makers evaluate each alternative and select the one which promises to maximise utility. They also must be free to choose and quickly change strategy and tactics according to the external threats, opportunities and power balance. Consequently, although the regime's goals remain consistent, the autonomous rational actor can display a maximum flexibility in tactics.

⁷ EHTESHAMI, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., The Syrian-Iranian Alliance, unpublished manuscript, p. 9.

⁸ VIOTTI, P.R. & KAUPI, M.V., International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism, Globalism, London, Macmillan, 1987, p. 6.

1.2.1.2 Criticism on the "rational actor" or "balance of power" model

The deficiency of this approach lies in the fact that it pays little attention to domestic influences. In the rational actor model, the decision-maker is autonomous and is not constrained by public opinion. It is assumed that the political elite can achieve this because the basis of their power rests upon unchallenged legitimacy, strong state institutions and a firm national consensus.

The rational actor model may seem more appropriate for developed states, however, it is my contention that it is an inadequate explanation for foreign policy formulation in the Third World. Developing states are still engaged in the process of nation-building, accompanied by a profound transformation of society and culture. As such legal/rational legitimacy is weak, institutions new and fragile, and national consensus precarious. Most elites accept the norm of legitimacy based upon legality, but the "accepted procedures" are still largely absent. Due to the lack of solid institutional underpinnings in which organisations and procedures acquire value and stability, regime legitimacy remains strongly based upon charisma and ideology.⁹ As such, if decision-makers ignore the effect of foreign policy as it affects public perception of their ideological legitimacy, they risk the stability of their regimes.

It seems apparent that due to the importance of the legitimacy problem in the Third World, the rational actor model is insufficient and too extreme for the purpose of this study as it ignores the impact of internal legitimacy upon the formulation of foreign policy.

⁹ HUDSON, M.C., o.c., p. 18.

1.2.2 The "domestic politics" model

1.2.2.1 Concept-description

The domestic politics model forms the opposite of the rational actor model. Adherents of the domestic politics model proclaim that foreign policy decision-making is mainly determined by internal factors, which make the decision-making process essentially irrational in the sense of not effectively coping with the external environment; foreign policy is viewed as exclusively a function or instrument of domestic politics.

Domestic factors potentially influencing foreign policy decision-making in the Syrian case can be divided into two categories: (i) the sectarian struggle and (ii) economic needs and interests. The sectarian domestic model can be found in the writings of Pipes; Lawson utilises the economic domestic model in explaining Syrian foreign policy decision-making.

According to Pipes, the Syrian elite forms an authoritarian-sectarian regime, whose prime interest in foreign policy decision-making is personal survival and staying in power. In this model, the Syrian leadership needs aggressive policies towards Israel to divert attention from domestic troubles and the Alawi character of the regime. Outwardly, the elite pretends to champion Pan-Arab nationalism; secretly, however, the Syrian regime embraces Pan-Syrianism.¹⁰ Pipes refers to it as a double game, in which the Alawi regime pursues Pan-Syrianism, but gives it a Pan-Arab cast.¹¹ The sectarian domestic model envisages Pan-Arab foreign policy as a tool to keep a minority sectarian regime in power; it denies that Syrian policy is shaped by external threats from Israel.

Lawson suggests that foreign policy decision-making is determined by the economic interests of the regime's constituencies. According to this model, the political elite is far from autonomous and needs to manipulate foreign policy for domestic reasons. The regime

¹⁰ EHTESHAMI, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A, o.c., p. 11.

¹¹ PIPES, D., Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 193.

utilises foreign policy in order to maintain the regime coalition and to divert attention from economic troubles by generating a sense of drama. Moreover, especially since the collapse of the communist bloc as an alternative pole to the capitalist market, there is a tendency to sell off foreign policy for oil rent, needed to service regime constituencies.¹² The economic domestic model envisages foreign policy as a mere instrument to extort economic aid needed for the ailing economy and to provide diversion from domestic, economic problems.

1.2.2.2 Criticism on the domestic politics model

Although there may seem to be a logic in the domestic politics argument, neither the sectarian domestic politics model nor the economic domestic politics model are suited for the purpose of this study.

The sectarian domestic politics model of Pipes appears to be too extreme when suggesting that the sectarian elite in Syria invents external threats to stay in power. The evidence is strong that Syria faces and perceives real threats from Israel, which inevitably shape its foreign policy. Moreover, the sectarian domestic politics model seems to be underestimating the strength and autonomy of the regime in solely perceiving it as wholly sectarian.

The economic domestic politics model of Lawson does not seem appropriate for our purposes as it ignores external threats and considers foreign policy too largely dependent upon economic interests. This suggests a foreign policy decision-making process according to an exclusively economic rationale, whereas this study intends to show that foreign policy decision-making mainly operates through a rationale based on political incentive.

¹² LAWSON, F., "Domestic Pressures and the Peace Process: Fillip or Hindrance?", KIENLE, E. (ed.), Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria, London, I.B. Taurus, 1994, p. 1.

Rejecting Pipes' and Lawson's domestic politics models for the purpose of this paper, does not imply that this author does not recognise the role of domestic politics in foreign policy decision-making. The importance of domestic politics cannot be ignored; however, the concept of legitimacy, specifically the regime's need to maintain its legitimacy, appears to provide a more suitable way of understanding how domestic politics affects foreign policy. Throughout the course of this dissertation, I will show how Asad's regime has been able to consolidate itself internally and attain the relative autonomy needed to shape its rational foreign policy according to the needs of the external power struggle. Asad managed this by continuously protecting his internal Arab nationalist legitimacy in the long run, whilst disregarding public opinion in the short run when the external struggle required it.

Finally, one can conclude that the domestic politics model, similarly to the rational actor model, is too extreme for the purpose of this study. The rational actor model focusses too exclusively on the external power struggle, whilst the domestic politics model perceives foreign policy as too dependent upon domestic conditions. Therefore, the concept of "omnibalancing", which envisions an attempt to balance internal and external influences, could provide a viable compromise.

1.2.3 Omnibalancing

1.2.3.1 Concept-description

Omnibalancing, a concept invented by Steven David, provides a better explanation of regime behaviour in the Third World and adapts various aspects of the formerly discussed models. Its major improvement on the balance of power model and the domestic politics model, is that it takes both external and internal threats into account. Moreover, omnibalancing selects or rejects elements from the balance of power model and the domestic politics model, which makes its perspectives much more suitable to examine the foreign policy decision-making process in the Third World.

Unlike the realist balance of power theory, omnibalancing assumes that Third World leaders do not necessarily represent unitary state interests; their prime interest is to ensure the political and physical survival of the regime.¹³ Therefore, the political elite of a state rather than the state itself should be the subject of investigation as a comprehensive insight of foreign policy decision-making of Third World leaders requires an understanding of what is in their best interest and not of what is in the best interest of the state.

Unlike the domestic politics model, omnibalancing rejects irrationalism in the foreign policy decision-making of Third World leaders. In accordance with one of the basic key assumptions of realism, foreign policy is perceived to be conducted in a rational manner, but from the point of view of the survival of the interests of the regime.¹⁴ Omnibalancing, however, stands close to the domestic politics model in its perception of internal threats. Third World countries are viewed as unstable, and because they enjoy a smaller degree of legitimacy compared to other parts of the world, the omnibalancing theory conceives internal threats as more dangerous than external threats.¹⁵ Whereas the balance of power model confines anarchy to the international arena, omnibalancing considers Third World domestic politics as a microcosm of international politics.¹⁶ According to omnibalancing, balance of power theory is flawed because it ignores internal threats as the most likely challenge to leadership of Third World states.

1.2.3.2 Criticisms of the omnibalancing model

The author of this dissertation has two interlinked criticisms on the omnibalancing formula.

¹³ DAVID, S., "Explaining Third World Alignment", World Politics, Vol. 43, No. 2, January 1991, p. 236.

¹⁴ DAVID, S., l.c., p. 237.

¹⁵ DAVID, S., l.c., p. 240.

¹⁶ DAVID, S., l.c., p. 243.

Firstly, although omnibalancing balances the internal and external struggle, it overstates the internal influence upon foreign policy decision-making. By underestimating the relative autonomy of the political leadership in some Third World states, this approach exaggerates the instability and weakness of some of these states. Omnibalancing overlooks the fact that some Third World states evolved into a further stage in which the state - although not to the same extent as in the West - is stronger and more consolidated.

Secondly, as omnibalancing is too concerned with the impact of internal factors upon foreign policy decision-making, it underestimates the importance of external threats. Steven David remarks that more Third World leaders have been overthrown by internal enemies than external enemies.¹⁷ This may be so in Africa and Latin America, but the Middle East region provides us with a different situation. In states such as Syria, external threats deserve more attention as their foreign policy decision-making is strongly determined by the existence of Israel, perceived as a major security threat in the external struggle.

In conclusion, this study accepts the basic premises of the omnibalancing perception, but finds that it needs revision in that some Third World states have built relatively strong states, whilst facing external threats. The following revised omnibalancing model will aim to provide the right framework to examine the roots of Syrian foreign policy today.

1.2.4 Omnibalancing II

Omnibalancing II aims at providing a framework for Third World states which face an external security threat. Omnibalancing II accepts the premise of omnibalancing that a Third World leader has to balance internal and external threats. However, in contradiction to omnibalancing, which suggests that the internal threat outbalances the external threat, this perspective will argue that in Third World states who face a powerful external threat, the external power struggle is the main concern of the state leadership. Furthermore, in

¹⁷ DAVID, S., *l.c.*, p. 238.

this type of state, internal consolidation is likely to take place at an earlier stage than in other states. The leader of such a state wishes to establish a stable internal balance, in order to increase his legitimacy and regime domestic survival, but equally in order to counter external threats. Once states are sufficiently consolidated internally, often through a mixture of ideological and neo-patrimonial legitimacy, the leader is able to conduct a rational foreign policy with relative freedom, appropriate to external threats and opportunities. Foreign policy is characterised by a consistency in goals, but tactical flexibility in strategy. In short, in this model the leader may ignore the domestic political consequences of foreign policy decisions in the short run, but in the long run he must protect his legitimacy.

Omnibalancing II suggests a three-stage evolution in state-building for Third World states facing an external threat.

The first stage is a period of instability in which a leader mainly focusses on internal politics, attempting to achieve sufficient legitimacy in the eyes of the public opinion by broadening his base.

The second stage heralds a period of relative stability in which the regime balances the various sections of its constituency. The centre of attention, however, shifts to the external arena. The political elite, through a combination of ideological and neo-patrimonial legitimacy, is able to conduct a foreign policy with relative autonomy as long as its proclaimed goals remain consistent.

Some Third World states evolve into a third stage, in which the leader is forced to adjust policies as the external environment prevents attainment of his ideological goals. If the leader wishes to keep a form of legitimacy, s/he has to adapt to the new conditions by seeking a new basis of legitimacy. This adjustment is often accompanied by a renewed interest in the internal arena and a strive to gain a degree of legal/rational legitimacy through the provision of economic prosperity and the gradual establishment of legal, democratic institutions.

In the following chapters, the author intends to illustrate the applicability of this theory in Third World countries which face an external threat with evidence on the Syrian case from 1970 until 1994.

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CHAPTER 2 : 1970-1990 - ACHIEVING AUTONOMY IN THE INTERNAL SPHERE

Within this chapter, I intend to indicate how President Hafiz al-Asad, between 1970 and 1990, formed a Bonapartist state that governed through quasi-corporatist structures. In this section, it is the intention of the author to show how Asad achieved relative autonomy from domestic forces by creating a variety of coalitions with differing political agendas. Asad broadened his original base by revitalising various elements of the alienated bourgeoisie groups, altering the regime's socialist orientated policy into one determined by more liberal concerns.

Economic liberalisation complemented the political rationale of broadening the base of support in order to establish and consolidate a stable regime. By carefully balancing the interests of the original, ideological constituency against those of the newly emerging constituency, the regime gradually transferred its basis of ideological legitimacy into one largely based upon a neo-patrimonial/ideological concerns. This strategy increased the chances of regime survival, and provided Asad with sufficient time to gain the necessary autonomy to pursue a rational foreign policy.

Chapter two will operate from the assumption that Asad, between 1970 and 1990, created a society, in which he was able to exist above the various social groups. Balancing their interests against the interests of the state, allowed him to maintain the tools for state-building and the resilience to reinforce his autonomy. As a consequence, this paper will argue that coalition building has consolidated the support of the regime, but has not resulted in any significant moves towards democratisation.

2.1 ORIGINS OF THE BA'TH CONSTITUENCY

In 1970, Asad inherited the Ba'th constituency that had emerged after Syrian independence and that had been consolidated after the establishment of the Ba'th regime in 1963. Through its ideology, and later on through its socialist policies of nationalisation and land reform, the Ba'th had gained a large rural support. Regime legitimacy in this period was largely dominated by its ideological component.¹⁸

Ba'th ideology was essentially the expression of the generational and ideological conflict that had emerged during and after Syria's bid for independence.¹⁹ It provided a counter-ideology expressing the discontent among the dominated classes in Syria. Its constitution and agenda are enshrined in the slogan of Unity, Socialism and Freedom. The Ba'th's objectives provide an explanation of the composition of its following.

The objectives can be summarised in three major points:²⁰

- a. The Ba'th wished to create a strong, stable state with a strong national economy, which would mitigate and absorb the existing social conflicts.

- b. The populist aspect of the Ba'th ideology called for socio-economic reforms, a welfare state, redistribution of resources and land reform. This part of the Ba'th ideology rejected the domination by the comprador elite and later by the national bourgeoisie, and provided the Ba'th with a large following among the rural community and segments of the middle and lower classes.

¹⁸ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development, London, Westview Press, 1989, p. 87.

¹⁹ LAPIDUS, I.M., A History of Islamic Societies, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 646.

²⁰ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syria Under the Ba'th: State Formation in a Fragmented Society", Arab Studies Quarterly, Summer 1982, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 179; HINNEBUSCH, R.A., Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development, London, Westview Press, 1989, p. 16, 19.

c. The objective of the nationalist side of the ideology was to unify the Arab nation and eradicate foreign presence, including Zionism, in the region. The loss of Palestine had largely delegitimised the ruling elites and through the nationalist component of their ideology, the Ba'thists increasingly acquired support from the Sunni community. However, after the failure of the United Arab Republic between Syria and Egypt, the Ba'thists lost a major part of its urban nationalist constituency and became more of a rural party.

In trying to build a base to challenge the old regime, the Ba'th party combined ideology with branch-type party institutions to politically organise and mobilise its constituency. Moreover, the Ba'th party placed many of its supporters in the army, providing it with a good base in the military and ultimately allowing it to replace the Syrian domestic elite through a coup in March 1963. This coup, however, was predominantly carried out by a group of young, radical officers and intellectuals, mostly of rural background, not by the old, liberal, urban Ba'this and its founders.

The Ba'th regime's main objective in the early sixties was to consolidate its power amidst strong opposition. To do so, it set out to forge a Leninist single party state. This meant that the regime was unwilling to share power with the other political forces and that it would seek to mobilise, through ideology and party organisation, a constituency among peasants, workers and the rural lower middle class. As a result, the Ba'th decreasingly represented the interests of the urban higher classes in its composition.

In addition, the Ba'th nationalised industries and carried out land reforms in order to build up its mass support and weaken its rivals in the landed class and the bourgeoisie. These measures, naturally, were very unpopular amongst the old landlords and the merchants.

"In view of the fact that the city people, and in particular the members of the professions and the commercial and industrial middle and lower middle classes in Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, Hamah and Homs, form a very significant element in terms not only of numbers but also of skills, education, administrative competence and economic savoir faire, the neglect

*of their interests by the Ba'th leaders in the 1960s, through the application of insufficiently considered socialist measures, and the fierce hostility that this aroused, exposed the Ba'th regime to great perils.*²¹

The old, moderate Ba'th leaders also rejected these radical, socialist policies, but, after a three year struggle for control over the party, they were purged in 1966.²²

Externally, the Ba'th regime sought to legitimise itself by transforming Syria into the key state of revolutionary Arab nationalism against Israel and the West. After the crushing Arab defeat in 1967 against Israel, this legitimation strategy failed and the radicalist policy became the reason for a further split within the Ba'th. A new "realist" wing emerged under General Hafiz al-Asad, arguing that in the face of an external threat, the social struggle had to be subordinated to national unity.²³ Asad wished to lend priority to military build up and economic growth²⁴, needed in the confrontation with Israel, over social reform. In order to do so, a retreat from radicalism, moderation of the urban-rural conflict, a détente with the bourgeoisie, and a broadening of the regime's base were necessary.²⁵ Asad's influence in that direction was already apparent in 1969, but its effect on the radicals' policy was negligible upon Jadid's general policy. In November 1970, Asad purged radical leader Salah Jadid and his followers²⁶ and introduced his policies of *infitah* and political stabilisation measures.

²¹ BATATU, H., "Some observations of the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for its Dominance", Middle East Journal, Summer 1981, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 340.

²² BRADY, T.F., "Syria leftists stage coup; regime's leaders seized", The New York Times, 24.02.1966.

²³ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syria", in: NIBLOCK, T. & MURPHY, E. (eds.), Economic and Political Liberalisation in the Middle East, London, British Academic Press, 1993, p. 182.

²⁴ HIRST, D., "Coup in Syria", The Guardian, 19.10.1970, p. 1.

²⁵ DRYSDALE, A., "The Syrian Political Elite, 1966-1976: A Spatial and Social Analysis", Middle Eastern Studies, January 1981, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 12.

²⁶ "Le ministre de la défense aurait pris le pouvoir à Damas", Le Monde, 15-16.11.1970.

2.2 1970-1980: ASAD'S FIRST DECENNIUM

Asad attempted to materialise his political ambition of creating a strong state with a broader base through a two-fold strategy; whilst continuing to implement social reforms and expanding the Ba'hist political organisation, Asad also pushed through limited economic liberalisation and re-structured the political system in order to increase regime stabilisation. In doing so, Asad had to act very astutely not to diminish the support of his original constituency, which was going to endure the negative consequences of the regime's reorientated policies.²⁷

This dual track policy would prove to work to the advantage of both the regime's traditional populist constituency and the co-opted parts of the bourgeoisie.²⁸ At the same time, Asad set about constructing a state structure with highly personalised and concentrated power in a dominant presidency which raised above his corporatist-like state, enabling him to balance off the various social forces in a Bonapartist fashion.²⁹ By cultivating two distinct coalitions (one economic and liberalising, the other political and populist) instead of constructing one grand coalition, Asad has avoided making a decisive choice between socialism and capitalism or between the bourgeoisie and the lower classes.³⁰ This mixed strategy has provided Asad with an amount of flexibility, always enabling him to balance between his two coalitions, according to the prevailing conditions.³¹

²⁷ by our own correspondent, "Private investment to be encouraged", Financial Times, 07.12.1970.

²⁸ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syria", in NIBLOCK, T & MURPHY, E. (eds.), o.c., p. 184.

²⁹ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syria Under the Ba'ht: State Formation in a Fragmented Society", Arab Studies Quarterly, Summer 1982, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 184, SCRUTON, R., A Dictionary of Political Thought, London, McMillan Press, 1982, p. 42.

³⁰ HEYDEMANN, S., "The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilisation in Syria", in: BARKEY, H. (ed.), The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1992, p. 21.

³¹ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Rural Politics in Ba'hist Syria: A Case Study in the Role of the Countryside in the Political Development of Arab Societies", Review of Politics, 1982, Vol. 44, No. 1, p. 129.

2.2.1 Syria's Infitah Policies during the 1970s

Syria's infitah policies in the 1970s can be divided into two partly overlapping stages: a first period running from 1970 to the 1973 War, followed by a period of intensified economic liberalisation in 1974/75 that began to peter out by 1977.³² Each of these stages has different goals and is aimed at different sections of the bourgeoisie stratum.

During the period between Asad's seizure of power and the outset of the 1973 War, Asad introduced a number of measures which aimed to reassure the remaining private sector in Syria and ease the command economy that the radicals had tried to build. Moreover, his policies were also aimed to encourage the old bourgeoisie who had left Syria after the start of the nationalisations, to return and start up new businesses.³³ The regime's new measures had some results, since an increasing number of small, private manufacturing and service businesses emerged.³⁴

After the 1973 War, Asad combined statism with limited economic liberalisation. As a frontline state, Syria received abundant Arab foreign aid³⁵ and the oil embargo of 1973 provoked a rise in oil prices³⁶, providing Syria with higher oil revenues. This allowed Asad to intensify his dual strategy. The increased revenues of the Syrian state were utilised for bureaucratic and public sector expansion; and, although the state led the development of the national economy, the regime also assigned a role to the private sector, especially in the less capital intensive ventures that would secure quick returns. As foreign

³² PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria, London, I.B. Taurus, 1994, p. 2.

³³ "Damas veut attirer les capitaux des émigrés arabes", Le Jour (Beirut), 21.02.1971.

³⁴ "Syrie: Coopération accrue avec le secteur privé", Le Monde, 24.02.1971.

³⁵ "Abu Dhabi to buy Syria new refinery", Daily Star (Beirut), 24.10.1973; "Syria to get £100 million in foreign aid", Daily Star (Beirut), 04.07.1974; "Accord de coopération économique entre la Syrie et les Emirats Arabes Unis", Agence France Presse, 09.11.1974; "Arab Fund lends £13.8 M to Syria", Daily Star (Beirut), 23.12.1974; "Trois accords de financement signé par la Syrie", L'Orient (Beirut), 24.12.1974.

³⁶ "Damascus was expecting bigger oil cuts, says Syrian minister", Daily News (Turkey), 20.10.1973.

exchange and state revenues were available, Asad engaged in further economic liberalisation through the encouragement of the merchant bourgeoisie and the fostering of local contractors. The regime also increasingly tolerated the rise of middle men between the state and foreign companies, allowing them to compete for a share of the state contracts financed by state oil revenues. By distributing the oil wealth available to it, the Syrian state acquired some of the characteristics of a patron state seeking to win legitimacy, in neo-patrimonial fashion, by materially rewarding its followers and supporters.

Asad economically liberalised in a selective way, enhancing the economic position of favoured elements of the private sector without giving it a credible share of the political power. Through its policies, the Syrian state in the 1970s became the pole around which various fragments of a new state dependent bourgeoisie began to form.³⁷ In the 1970s large segments of the private sector remained dependent upon the goodwill of the regime. As a result, an independent cohesive bourgeoisie could not be consolidated. The subgroups of the Syrian business community proved to have different origins and interests and therefore could not provide a common front. Moreover, the state's policies of selective liberalisation, playing one segment of the private sector against the other, prevented the bourgeoisie to develop from a "class in itself" to a "class for itself".³⁸ Perthes claims:

"Being able to satisfy discriminatively the demands of limited subgroups of Syria's business community, the regime was in position to fragment the private sector politically and prevent it from becoming a collective negotiator."³⁹

At the same time, the political elite became increasingly embourgeoisied as they acquired wealth through corruption, utilised the black market, and entered political and marriage

³⁷ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syria", in: NIBLOCK, T. & MURPHY, E. (eds.), o.c., p. 184.

³⁸ BAHOUT, J., "The Syrian Business Community and Prospects of Political Change", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 10.

³⁹ PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 7.

alliances with the bourgeoisie.⁴⁰ They became known as the state bourgeoisie. According to Seale, Asad closed his eyes to this emerging phenomenon. He writes:

"to govern and modernise Syria, Asad believed he needed a strong monied class of his own men which would supersede the sons of the old bourgeoisie."⁴¹

In spite of the process of embourgeoisement of the political elite, it did not see its interests as identical to those of the bourgeoisie. Although the state encouraged a resurgence of the bourgeoisie, it continued to restrict the private sector within distinct boundaries, preserving its dominant grip over "national" economic sectors and not considering privatisation of inefficient state-owned industries, even when this was economically irrational.⁴² This suggests that in Asad's policies the political logic outbalances the economic logic. Bureaucracy and public sector - even if they are inefficient - had to remain in the hands of the state, because of their powerful role of political control. With this strategy, the autonomy of the regime continued to be protected from the bourgeoisie.

From 1976/77 onwards, the Syrian regime came increasingly under pressure. Disappointment with the regime's policies among the social forces damaged by them (especially the traditional urban quarters), became more and more apparent as inflation, corruption, nepotism and illegal enrichment of the regime elite became more obvious.⁴³ Coinciding with the deterioration in Syria's economy, discontent also rose about Syria's intervention in Lebanon. From this environment, political Islam established a foundation to challenge the

⁴⁰ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "The Politics of Liberalisation in Syria", Conference paper, Durham, Autumn 1993, p. 5.

⁴¹ SEALE, P., Asad: Struggle for the Middle East, London, I.B. Taurus, 1988, p. 457.

⁴² HEYDEMANN, S., "The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilisation in Syria", in: BARKEY, H. (ed.), o.c., p. 20.

⁴³ PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 12.

regime with its counter-ideology. The regime's decisive crushing of the Islamic opposition, however, ultimately enhanced its autonomy from society.⁴⁴

2.2.2 Asad's Political Restructuring

2.2.2.1 Limited political liberalisation

Asad's *infitah* was accompanied by a restructuring of the political arena and the foundation of several new political institutions. This creation of new institutions, however, can hardly be considered as a political democratisation effort. Although it broadened the regime's political base and provided it with a higher legitimacy, it was primarily meant to stabilise the regime, to neutralise the opposition and to heighten the regime's control over opposition and Syrian society.

One of the first acts of Asad was the creation in 1971 of the "Majlis al-shab"⁴⁵, the People's Council or Asad's idea of a Parliament. It consisted of 173 members: an absolute majority of 87 Ba'thists, 8 Communists and 36 representatives of the farmers.⁴⁶ In 1973, the People's Council was for the first time elected, instead of appointed. It is very difficult, however, to consider this creation as a Parliament as it did not have any legislative powers.⁴⁷

In March 1972, the National Progressive Front (*al-jabba al-taqaddamia al-watania*) was established.⁴⁸ This new body consisted of 18 members, elected from the People's Council:

⁴⁴ AYUBI, N., Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 93.

⁴⁵ "Damas: Un conseil du peuple de 173 membres (dont le chef de l'état)", L'Orient (Beirut), 17.02.1971.

⁴⁶ HOPWOOD, D., Syria, 1945-1986: Politics and Society, London, Unwin Hyman, 1988, p. 56.

⁴⁷ DEVLIN, J.F., Syria: Modern State in an Ancient Land, London, Westview Press, 1983, p. 61.

⁴⁸ "Le front progressiste d'union nationale a été officiellement créé", Le Monde, 15.02.1972.

half of them were Ba'thists; the other 50% formed the opposition and were a group of tolerated, smaller parties. The creation of the NPF provides an example of the regime's stabilisation tactics. The Ba'th holds the absolute majority in the front and is the only party that could recruit its members in the army and in the universities. The co-opted parties were neutralised as they were represented in an official body, but had less potential than if they had not been incorporated. Moreover, these parties were divided over whether or not to accept NPF conditions, and were therefore further weakened. Although to the outside, Asad's political base seemed to have broadened substantially, it became apparent that Asad had only incorporated the opposition into official institutions to maintain a tighter control over their activities.

2.2.2.2 Neo-patrimonialism

After seizing power, Asad faced a dilemma. If he wished to broaden the regime's power base, pursue national unity and introduce major social reforms, Asad needed to maintain power. However, in order to retain his power, Asad recognised the benefits of utilising sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties to consolidate his regime⁴⁹. Use of such ties, however, had the potential to undermine the legitimacy of his regime and the construction of a genuinely unified Syrian state, which was deemed necessary for stability inside Syria and for the struggle against the Zionist entity.

Although the agenda of the Ba'th party had never been specifically designed for minorities, its message since the early days of independence had always had particular appeal to these groups.⁵⁰ The national secular aspect of the Ba'th ideology attracted the non-Sunni sections of the population as it regarded them as full Arab Syrian nationals,

⁴⁹ VAN DAM, N., The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics, 1961-1980, London, Croom Helm, 1981, p. 94.

⁵⁰ KESSLER, M.N., Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power, Washington, D.C., National Defense University Press, 1987, p. 28.

irrespective of religion⁵¹; the socialist message of the Ba'ath ideology gave the poorer people, notably the minority Alawis, hope to improve their living standards through economic and social reforms.

Often members of minority sects gravitated to the army as it provided the only avenue for political and social advancement open to them in a Sunni-dominated society. Members of the Sunni community tended to enter business after their military service, whilst the minorities often continued in the army. This resulted with an imbalance of the minorities in the lower ranks of the army. By the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s, power struggles among the Sunni officers instigated a fragmentation of loyalties as purges became common place. Younger officers - many of them both Ba'athist and members of minorities - were promoted to replace the purged Sunni officers, resulting in the effective loss of control over the army by the Sunni community.⁵² This situation provided the opposition with the occasion to launch a coup on 8 March 1963, which became known as the Ba'ath Revolution.⁵³

After the 1963-coup, the Alawis gradually gained a dominant position within the Ba'ath party and in political life through a purge against the Druze in 1966 and against the remaining bloc of rural Sunnis in 1968.⁵⁴ The struggle which followed between the radicals led by Jadid and Asad's realists was between two Alawi-dominated blocs. The struggle between these two blocs can be characterised by a distinct reliance upon one's sect or even tribe, and personal loyalty. The rivalry between the two wings resulted in favour of the realist wing after Asad's coup on 13 November 1970. In view of the fact that most prominent Sunni, Druze and Isma'ili officer factions in the Armed Forces had been purged or neutralised, the only real challenge to Asad's regime could only come from

⁵¹ FAKSH, M.A., "The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Force", Middle Eastern Studies, April 1984, Vol. 20, No. 2, p. 141.

⁵² OLSON, R., The Ba'ath and Syria, 1947 to 1982: The Evolution of Ideology, Party and State, Princeton, Kingston Press, 1982.

⁵³ KESSLER, M.N., o.c., p. 29.

⁵⁴ BATATU, H., l.c., p. 343.

within the Alawi community. According to Van Dam⁵⁵, Asad, therefore, formed an inner core of supporters around him with whom he had a close personal relationship, such as members of his own family, tribe, or village and its surroundings to secure his position, even against the people of his own religious community.

Asad, whilst seemingly broadening the regime's legitimacy base, at the same time developed a small coterie of confidants around him, allowing him to maintain tight personal control over the military, the security services, and communications.

2.2.2.3 Corporatism

Asad also intensified his control over the Ba'th's original constituency, particularly over the popular organisations such as the Trade Unions and the Peasant Unions. After his coup, he had purged all the radical elements in these organisations and by 1974, he controlled them completely through their transformation from radical syndicates into quasi-corporatist institutions.⁵⁶ Although the popular organisations grew considerably in numerical and organisational strength, they lost too much of their autonomy to enable them to resist the regime's unpopular policies.

"Both the Trade Unions and the Peasant union, and other less important popular organisations such as the women's and students' unions and the official youth organisation, became quasi-official, non-voluntary, exclusive bodies, entrusted with certain quasi-governmental functions and substantial functions of control. Their leadership was hand-picked by the regime and became part of the regime's elite."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ VAN DAM, N., o.c., p. 90.

⁵⁶ PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 9.

⁵⁷ PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 10.

In January 1973, a new Constitution was issued⁵⁸, in which Asad institutionalised his presidential, personal regime, providing him with considerable powers on political, military, legislative and administrative levels. These measures allowed Asad to govern with increasing autonomy, balancing the interests of heterogeneous social groups in an evolving quasi-corporatist state.

By 1974, most of Asad's political restructuring programme was in place and these measures were not transformed into any form of political liberalisation. This policy shows, that the regime's ultimate goal - although attempting to broaden its base through economic liberalisation - was politically motivated, attempting to consolidate its existence and relative autonomy through a combination of institutionalising a quasi-corporatist state and the creation of a broader political base, taking the form of alternative coalitions.

In terms of regime legitimacy, Asad's policies in his first decennium can be summarised in the following ways. Whilst constructing a neo-patrimonial base of authority around the presidency in order to maintain relative autonomy, the regime also attempted to preserve a degree of ideological legitimacy the regime by continuing to adhere to an Arab nationalist policy and consolidating the social reforms needed to retain the support of its original, plebeian social constituency. In the meantime, however, the regime issued policies of limited economic liberalisation and political stabilisation in order to neutralise traditionally opposed sections of society and to gradually gain some legal/rational legitimacy.

2.3 1980-1990: ASAD'S SECOND DECENNIUM

Although the Syrian regime did eradicate the Islamic rebellion of the late 1970s and the early 1980s, its chances of survival were brought into question. Economic stagnation set in for much of the 1980s, as a result of the inability of the regime to turn its public sector into an efficient engine of capital accumulation. Asad, realising that his public sector was not sufficiently dynamic to lift Syria out of its economic crisis, set about deepening

⁵⁸ "Syria to debate Budget, Permanent Constitution", Daily Star (Beirut), 03.01.1973.

economic liberalisation. His economic policies, however, were not based upon an economic rationale, but were mainly driven by political considerations. The economic crisis of the 1980s provided Asad with the opportunity to legitimise changes in policy which, however, served his political interests more than purely economic logic.

In this section, I intend to follow Heydemann's line when he writes:

"The cumulative impact of circumstances necessitated Syria's gradual move towards stabilisation-style reforms after 1981, but the decision to introduce these policies independent of the IMF was clearly a political decision taken despite the country's limited resources and limited alternative lending sources."⁵⁹

Asad selectively coopted sectors previously excluded from the regime's coalition into his quasi-corporatist state. He selected those segments of the private sector which had a high capacity to accumulate foreign exchange, whilst remaining too weak to organise themselves as an opposition group against the regime.⁶⁰ These forces were indispensable in securing the resources necessary to satisfy the demands of the regime's original constituency, which remained politically important but was an economical burden. Moreover, this strategy also permitted Asad to broaden his political base and legitimacy beyond the Ba'th. This, however, does not imply that Asad's economic liberalisation process was accompanied by political democratisation. During most of the 1980s, the Syrian regime did not introduce any political adjustments. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the changes in Eastern Europe did Syria decide on some form of political restructuring. Hinnebusch refers to this process as "calculated political decompression" as it forms a substitute for substantial political pluralisation.⁶¹ This will be discussed in Chapter 4.

⁵⁹ HEYDEMANN, S., "The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilisation in Syria", in: BARKEY, H. (ed.), o.c., p. 18.

⁶⁰ HEYDEMANN, S., "The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilisation in Syria", in: BARKEY, H. (ed.), o.c., p. 19.

⁶¹ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "The Politics of Liberalisation in Syria", Conference paper, Durham, 1993, p. 9.

2.3.1 Syria's second Infitah

The inability of the Syrian public sector to acquire sufficient resources, its increasing foreign debts, and its failure of capitalist accumulation, pushed the regime to turn to the private sector for help and to gradually change its development policy from import substitution to an export oriented strategy.

Until 1987, the infitah was still centred on import substitution. Although Asad during the Eight Regional Congress in 1985, openly backed a larger role and greater scope for the private sector, his rhetoric was not followed by clear policy directives.⁶² A gradual shift in policy only became apparent after 1986, when Syria was faced with a foreign currency crisis, because it had continued its policy of import substitution in spite of continuous balance of payments deficits.⁶³ A major breakthrough would only follow when Asad signed the Legislative Decree No. 10 in May 1991⁶⁴, encouraging investments from Syrians, expatriates, Arab and foreign investors in foreign currency in the Syrian economy, except in tourism.⁶⁵

The infitah policies of the late 1980s combined with a deteriorating performance of the public sector have resulted in a substantial relative growth of the private sector and a reduced role of the state in the Syrian economy. Although the liberalisation policies reached much deeper than the ones in the 1970s, one should bare in mind two major requisites for the success of the regime's economic policies in the 1980s:

Firstly, the loss of state control over parts of the economy, does not imply that the private sector can enforce its own policies; the government continues to determine the timing and

⁶² SEALE, P., o.c., p. 452.

⁶³ KIENLE, E., "The Return of Politics? Scenarios for Syria's Second Infitah", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 5.

⁶⁴ "Investment law comes into force", Middle East Economic Digest (MEED), 17.05.1991.

⁶⁵ AFFAKI, B.G., "La Loi No. 10 sur la Promotion des Investissements: Une Nouvelle Donnée sur le Marché Syrien", Revue de Droit des Affaires Internationales, 1992, No. 4, p. 385.

the scope of liberalisation measures. The regime has only liberalised selectively, taking into account its political objectives and allying itself only with some segments of the bourgeoisie. As a result, some parts of the bourgeoisie enriched themselves substantially, thereby widening the gap with the vast petite bourgeoisie majority and increasing its fragmentation.⁶⁶

Secondly, no matter how economically irrational it might be to maintain the public sector, until 1990 the regime had no plans to dismantle it, as the public sector remained a major component of the state's client network. It was a key source of employment and an important instrument of control. Indeed, the dependency of the regime upon the private sector during the economic crisis, with only limited demands of the public sector seems to suggest the regime's determination to protect its original constituency from the demands of stabilisation.⁶⁷

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⁶⁶ PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 20, 22.

⁶⁷ HEYDEMANN, S., "The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilisation in Syria", in: BARKEY, H. (ed.), o.c., p. 31.

CHAPTER 3 : 1970 - 1990 THE RATIONAL ACTOR IN THE EXTERNAL SPHERE

In this chapter, the author intends to convey how Asad, between 1970 and 1990, has conducted his foreign policy in a rational manner. To fully appreciate this, it is essential to distinguish between policy objectives and the strategy employed to achieve them. Asad sometimes appeared to employ tactics which deviated from the standards of Arab nationalism, but, nevertheless, served the pursuit of his ultimate Arab nationalist goal, which remained remarkably consistent over the years. In an interview with Newsweek in 1974, Asad made his objectives very clear:

"For our part we look upon peace in its true sense...a peace without occupation, without destitute peoples, and without citizens whose homeland is denied to them...Anyone who imagines that the peace process can be a piecemeal is mistaken...We say now as we have always said - that peace should be based on complete withdrawal from the lands occupied in 1967 and on the full restoration of the rights of the Palestinian Arab people."⁶⁸

Asad's tactical flexibility in his foreign policy decision-making, however, affected the regime's ideological legitimacy within Syria. This suggests that the regime enjoyed only relative autonomy in the pursuance of its foreign policy objectives. In this chapter, the author will attempt to illustrate that Asad, in order to maintain a degree of legitimacy, had to justify his political manoeuvring in an Arab nationalist guise.

⁶⁸ SEALE, P., o.c., p. 256.

Due to the wealth of literature and the variety of case studies available, this chapter will be confined to four principle sections:

- (i) Pan-Arab aspirations
- (ii) Foreign policy objectives
- (iii) Asad's pan-Arab strategy
- (iv) The Palestinians in Lebanon: A case study illustrating tactical flexibility.

3.1 PAN-ARAB ASPIRATIONS

Pan-Arabism faced a crushing defeat after the June War of 1967.⁶⁹ Until this point pan-Arabism included the total liberation of Palestine. The monumental defeat of 1967 and the emergence of Hafiz al-Asad as the realist strategist⁷⁰ in Syria played an instrumental role in redefining the essential tenets of pan-Arabism.

Prior to 1967, an objective of pan-Arabism was the removal of Israel and the return of Palestine to the Arab fold. However,

"the 1967 defeat had underlined the vulnerability of the Arab system of states, the bankruptcy of the Arab order and its guardians. The champions of pan-Arabism were defeated in the Arab system; the idea had lost its magic."⁷¹

⁶⁹ AJAMI, F., "The End of Pan-Arabism", in: FARAH, T.E. (ed.), Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate, London, Westview Press, 1987, p. 98.

⁷⁰ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Revisionist Dreams, Realist Strategies: The Foreign Policy of Syria", in: KORANY, B. & DESSOUKI, A.E.H. (eds.), The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenges of Change, Oxford, Westview Press, 1991, p. 374.

⁷¹ AJAMI, F., "The end of Pan-Arabism", in: FARAH, T.E. (ed.), o.c., p. 98.

After Asad seized power in 1970, he attempted to introduce more moderate ambitions and realistic pan-Arab goals for Syria. He was in a suitable position to do so, as the Arab world had lost Nasser as its leader.

*"The departure of the greatest Arab leader of modern times left a yawning gap in Arab politics. There was no longer one leader who could dominate the scene. By coincidence of timing, as Nasser died Asad was beginning his tenure of power. He became the ruler of Syria, a dominating figure but, unlike Nasser, with little appeal to the masses outside his own country."*⁷²

Asad tactically accepted the status quo of the regional sub-system of states and the resolutions 242 and 338.⁷³ Within this paper, I intend to show how Asad has remained consistent with the redefined objectives of pan-Arabism since 1970.

If one is to conceptualise pan-Arab aspirations as the liberation of the occupied territories, it is then necessary to identify Syrian foreign policy objectives and consider their compatibility with this scaled-down version of pan-Arabism.

3.2 SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES

When examining Syria's foreign policy since 1970, one can deduce four main objectives:⁷⁴

⁷² HOPWOOD, D., o.c., London, Unwin Hyman, 1988, p. 54.

⁷³ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Revisionist Dreams, Realist Strategies: The Foreign Policy of Syria", in: KORANY, B. & DESSOUKI, A.E.H. (eds.), o.c., p. 379.

⁷⁴ RAMET, P., The Soviet-Syrian Relationship Since 1955: A Troubled Alliance, Oxford, Westview Press, 1990, p. 7-8; RABINOVICH, I., "The Foreign Policy of Syria: Goals, Capabilities, Constraints and Options", Survival, 1982, Vol. 24, No. 4, p. 175; MCLAURIN, R.D., MUGHISUDDIN, M. & WAGNER, A.R., Foreign Policy Making in the Middle East: Domestic Influences on Policy in Egypt, Iraq, Israel, and Syria, London, Praeger Publishers, 1977, p. 250; HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Revisionist Dreams, Realistic Strategies: The Foreign Policy of Syria", in: KORANY, B. & DESSOUKI, A. (eds.), o.c., p. 375, 379, 392-393.

- (i) defense of the Syrian state in attempting to restore and preserve territorial integrity
- (ii) priority to the more realistic goal of recovery of the occupied territories, in particular the Golan, rather than the liberation of Palestine. Achievement of Palestinian national rights in West Bank and Gaza.
- (iii) terminate the state of diplomatic isolation in which Syria found itself throughout the 1960s, by asserting its regional influence.
- (iv) resist and contain territorial expansion into the region by foreign powers, mainly the United States and Israel.

Overall, Syrian foreign policy objectives have been compatible with Syria's pan-Arab aspirations. The perception that Asad, in pursuing his foreign policy, seems to deviate from his pan-Arab aspirations can be explained through the tactical flexibility with which Asad responds to threats, constraints or opportunities in the international system.

3.3 ASAD'S PAN-ARAB STRATEGY

Hafiz al-Asad's strategy for the liberation of the occupied territories took shape as part of his "Corrective Movement" in 1970. It was a realist response to Jadid's former rejectionist posture in relation to Israel. Syria's new stance would become more explicit after the 1973-war. Whilst Asad's goal concerning the occupied territories and Israel remained consistent throughout the years, his strategies evolved considerably.

3.3.1 1970-1973: war for peace

Israel's victory in the 1967-war had left the Arabs with a profound feeling of humiliation and bitterness. Israel had taken control over the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the Sinai peninsula, and since then there had been no concessions over these occupied territories. Asad was aware that this status quo was likely to remain unless

the "no peace, no war"⁷⁵ situation in the Middle East received greater attention from the superpowers. Asad, therefore, wished to launch another war in an attempt to alter the balance of power in favour of the Arab states, hoping that in this way Israel would ultimately be pressured into serious negotiations on the basis of Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967. Still consolidating his power against the radicals, Asad had, in December 1970, reaffirmed Syria's rejection of the UN 242 resolution on the grounds that it meant the "liquidation of the Palestinian question".⁷⁶ By 1971, however, Asad was hinting that UN resolution 242 might be accepted on condition that it was interpreted to guarantee Palestinian rights.

Syria continued its preparation for war by breaking out of its isolation, especially by restoring relations with Saudi-Arabia, by building up a solid relation with the Soviet Union, and by moving towards cooperation with Egypt. Improving ties with both the Soviet Union and Egypt was essential to Asad's strategy for defeating Israel. The Soviet Union provided the main source for developing the capacity of Syria's army; an alliance with Egypt forming a two-front bloc against Israel was the only viable option if the 1973 War was to become a success.

Nevertheless, although Egypt and Syria had carefully prepared plans, it became apparent at the outbreak of the war that their specific aims differed. Whereas Asad wished to liberate all the Arab lands occupied after the 1967 War, Sadat only wanted a "limited war"⁷⁷ through which he could revive his peace diplomacy with a shock to the status quo. Sadat's aims were satisfied with the return of the Sinai, whilst for Syria the return of the Golan was considered only a first step for negotiations.

⁷⁵ DUPUY, T.N., Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974, London, Macdonald and Jane's, 1978, p. 387.

⁷⁶ SEALE, P., o.c., p. 185.

⁷⁷ WRIGHT, C.A., Facts and Fables: The Arab-Israeli Conflict, London, Kegan Paul International, 1989, p. 133.

"Asad went to war because he believed there could be no satisfactory negotiation with Israel until the Arabs had snatched back some at least of their lost land. Peace-making, he believed, could be a product of war, but not a substitute for it. Sadat went to war because the peace diplomacy he was already conducting, covertly as well as overtly, had faltered. He thought a shock would revive it."⁷⁸

It would appear that from 1970 until the October War, Asad considered war as the best strategic option to fulfil his pan-Arab aspirations. This strategy was revised at the outset of the war in an attempt to seize upon the military gains through diplomatic channels as Syria had not been able to hold the part of the Golan it liberated, but actually lost a sliver of extra territory before the cease-fire.

3.3.2 1973-1979: land for peace

The October War nevertheless provided sufficient momentum to challenge the status quo. For the first time, Israel's military superiority had come into question; combined with the oil embargo this convinced the West of the potential costs of failing to accommodate Arab interests.⁷⁹ Asad recognised the potential of diplomacy and changed the balance of strategy away from the military option. Convinced that a comprehensive settlement was achievable as long as the Arabs refrained from making separate peace deals, he accepted for the first time possible negotiations based upon the UN resolutions 338 and 242.⁸⁰ The United States and in particular its Secretary of State Henry Kissinger ruled out the possibility of a comprehensive settlement and opted for step-by-step diplomacy; limited agreements would be reached between Israel and individual Arab states on a bilateral basis. The PLO would

⁷⁸ SEALE, P., o.c., p. 195.

⁷⁹ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Revisionist Dreams, Realist Strategies: The Foreign Policy of Syria", in: KORANY, B. & DESSOUKI, A.E.H. (eds.), o.c., p.394.

⁸⁰ DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., Syria and the Middle East Peace Process, New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991, p. 107-108.

be excluded from all negotiations.⁸¹ Syria's hope that the Arab states would refrain from bilateral negotiations with Israel under the auspices of the United States, were quickly dashed. Indeed, although nothing of the sort had been discussed during the pre-war planning, Egypt unilaterally decided to engage in Sinai military disengagement talks with Israel.⁸² As a result, a first disengagement agreement between Egypt and Israel was signed on 18 January 1974.⁸³

Out of fear that Syria would be left out of any settlement, Asad then agreed to negotiate with Kissinger for disengagement on the Syrian front on the condition that a disengagement would not become a substitute for an overall settlement.⁸⁴ Despite Asad's hard bargaining and due to Kissinger's success in isolating Syria in the course of the negotiations, Asad had to settle for an agreement where Syria only recovered the territory lost during the 1973 War and a small strip of what was lost during the June War. In return, UN troops would be stationed between the Syrian and Israeli lines.⁸⁵ The agreement was signed in Geneva on 31 May 1974.⁸⁶

Until the signing of the Camp David Accords, many ways for a peace settlement were proposed, but none of them gained momentum. Syria wanted to establish an international conference, where - under the supervision of the United Nations, the United States and the Soviet Union - a comprehensive solution for the occupied territories and the Palestinian problem could be reached between a united Arab delegation and Israel. In doing so, Asad attempted to avoid a second separate disengagement agreement between Egypt and Israel. However, he failed and, in September 1975, Egypt, Israel and the US signed the trilateral

⁸¹ SEALE, P., o.c., p. 217.

⁸² SEALE, P., o.c., p. 228.

⁸³ SEALE, P., o.c., p. 236.

⁸⁴ DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 109.

⁸⁵ DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 110.

⁸⁶ SEALE, P., o.c., p. 246.

Sinai 2.⁸⁷ This agreement resulted in the complete rupture of relations between Egypt and Syria. Moreover, it enabled Israel to concentrate its forces on the Syrian front, creating an intensified security threat for Syria. Israel realised that Asad had lost his bargaining position as without Egypt, he had lost the deterrent factor of a credible military threat.

In the period between the signing of the second disengagement agreement and the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979, a gradual policy change took place in Syria. Asad realised that Syria needed to build up its military and regional importance if it wanted to be credible in any peace negotiations. Therefore, in the early 1980s, whilst striving to achieve military and political parity with Israel, Asad adopted a policy of "tactical rejectionism".⁸⁸ Syria moved closer to the Soviet Union - a necessary step in its strive for military parity - and in the meanwhile refrained from further negotiations, attempting to prevent any US initiative on Israeli terms. In implementing this policy, Syria developed into a major regional power, whose interests could not be ignored in potential peace initiatives. As Ma'oz and Yaniv write and as will be illustrated in the next section:

"Syria has become the key to any solution in Lebanon and a dead-weight on the Arab-Israeli peace process. It may not be an established fact that Syria can prevent any serious move towards an Arab-Israeli settlement, but it is no longer a fantasy to argue that this is so."⁸⁹

3.3.3 1979-1985: the strive for strategic parity

Syria's doctrine of strategic parity grew out of frustration with the Camp David peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and the exhaustion of the peace process. Its determination for strategic parity grew even more after Israel's annexation of the Golan in December

⁸⁷ SEALE, P., o.c., p. 258.

⁸⁸ DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 118.

⁸⁹ MA'OZ, M. & YANIV, A., "The Syrian Paradox", in: MA'OZ, M. & YANIV, A. (eds.), Syria under Asad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks, London, Croom Helm, 1987, p. 261-262.

1981.⁹⁰ The reason why Asad opted for the doctrine of strategic parity did not emanate from a revived war option but rather, it stemmed from his belief that a credible deterrent was necessary. The cornerstone of this policy was the conviction that as long as Israel maintained its overall superiority, no just settlement could be attained.⁹¹

Although by the second half of the 1980s, Syria had built up sufficient military strength to deter Israel, it was not enough to adjust the balance of strategic parity in its favour. In practice, Syria could possibly withstand an Israeli military offensive, but it seems unlikely that it would or could launch a successful attack itself. This shortcoming can be attributed to the fact that military parity is only one aspect in the drive for strategic parity. Strategic parity, however, also includes aspects such as manpower and technological advancement, economic capabilities and the quality of coherence within the Arab world. Syria found itself in a disadvantaged position on all these complementary aspects.

3.3.3.1 Man power and technological advancement

Although the Syrian army has proved to be effective on several occasions (i.e. 1973 War, Lebanon), it has not capitalised upon its military successes. In fact, only when a new Arab alliance would re-emerge, could the Israeli troops be outnumbered. George Ball calculated that by 1986, a Syrian-Jordanian-Iraqi coalition would have been able to mobilise 1.27 million men to Israel's 700,000.⁹² However, such an Arab war coalition has been lacking ever since the 1973 War.

⁹⁰ HOPWOOD, D., o.c., p. 65.

⁹¹ KHALIDI, A.S. & AGHA, H., "The Syrian Doctrine of Strategic Parity", in: KIPPER, J. & SAUNDERS, H.H. (eds.), The Middle East in Global Perspective, London, Westview Press, 1991, p. 190.

⁹² DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 141.

3.3.3.2 Economic capacity

In contrast with Israel, Syria's economy faced many difficulties. The cost for its intervention in Lebanon and its aim for military parity with Israel had severely strained the Syrian economy. Moreover, as a result of Asad's growing isolation in the Arab world, Syria received less oil-revenues and financial support from the other Arab states.⁹³

"The more successful Asad has been in pursuing his regional strategic ambitions, the more financial benefits, mainly in form of Gulf Arab aid, have accrued; conversely, when things have gone against Asad, as was the case through the early 1980s, Syria has suffered financially."⁹⁴

3.4 1985-1990: BREAKING OUT OF ISOLATION

3.4.1 Rapprochement with Jordan

The start of a new era in inter-Arab politics was marked in December 1985 with the talks between president Asad and King Hussain of Jordan. It was their first meeting since January 1979.⁹⁵ Diplomatic relations between Syria and Jordan had ceased after the Camp David Accords. As a result of this peace treaty, Jordan had become increasingly pressured to conduct bilateral negotiations with Israel over the occupied West Bank. Out of protest for these potentially direct negotiations between Jordan and Israel and out of a fear to be excluded from any settlement, Asad had broken all relations with Jordan. The abrogation in relations between the two countries grew even stronger when in the Iran-Iraq war,

⁹³ LAWSON, F., "Libéralisation économique en Syrie et en Irak", Maghreb Machrek, 1991, vol. 9, No. 128, p. 28-30.

⁹⁴ "Syria reaps rewards of regional policies", MEED, 27.09.1991, p. 5.

⁹⁵ BUTTER, D., "Asad and Hussain join forces", MEED, 04.01.1986, p. 3

Jordan took sides with Iraq, while Syria supported Iran. In 1985, however, Syria and Jordan - under Saudi pressure - moved towards a rapprochement.⁹⁶

3.4.2 Rapprochement with Egypt

Relations between Egypt and Syria - also interrupted after the signing of the Camp David Accords - were only restored in December 1989. This evolution had been initiated by Egypt's unconditional readmission to the Arab League at the 1989 Casablanca summit, that Syria also officially sanctioned.⁹⁷ Syria wished to improve its relations with Egypt for three main reasons: firstly, Syria wished to protect itself against the threatening behaviour of Saddam Hussain after the end of the Iran-Iraq war; secondly, it wanted to find compensation for its reduced link with the Soviet Union; lastly, Asad hoped to improve Syria's bargaining position for peace as renewed relations with Egypt, which implied an acceptance of Egypt's recognition of Israel's right to exist, could lead to a détente in his relations with the United States.⁹⁸

3.4.3 Impact of the international environment

By 1987 it had become clear that the developments within the Soviet Union and Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost would have repercussions for the formulation of policy towards the Middle East. Indeed, the decline of East-West rivalry reduced Syria's strategic importance to the USSR and even led to an improvement of Soviet relations with Israel.

⁹⁶ DEVLIN, J.F., "Syria: Consistency at home and abroad", *Current History*, February 1986, Vol. 85, No. 508, p. 85.

⁹⁷ KHALIDI, A.S. & AGHA, H., "The Syrian Doctrine of Strategic Parity", in: KIPPER, J. & SAUNDERS, H.H. (eds.), *o.c.*, p. 212.

⁹⁸ RABINOVICH, I., "Syria in 1990", *Current History*, January 1991, Vol. 90, No. 552, p. 30.

"The climate, both worldwide and in the Middle East has changed significantly. The antagonism between the Soviet Union and the United States in that region has ended. This alone is a factor that affects all the elements of the Middle East equation. It is no longer what it once was."⁹⁹

Due to the challenge of a changing World Order, Asad needed to reorientate his strategy. He continued to strive for strategic parity with Israel, whilst combining his effort to break away from his isolation within the Arab world with the achievement of a rapprochement with the West, especially with the United States. Asad calculated that another alternation in strategy was essential to restore the possibility for peace negotiations in the future.

"The withdrawal of the Soviet Union from the superpower rivalry appeared to render Syria's strategy of tactical rejectionism unviable and left no check on Israeli power projection...Asad believed that Syria could not wage a war without the Soviet Union and could not achieve peace without the United States."¹⁰⁰

3.4.4 Relations with the United States and the West

Despite Syria's incremental disengagement with the Soviet Union after 1987, its relations with the United States improved at a slow pace because of two reasons:

Primarily, Syria and the United States had fundamentally different plans for the Middle East region. Syria wanted to establish an international conference with PLO and Soviet participation, and negotiations on the basis of UN resolution 242. While purely bilateral issues could be discussed between the concerned parties, comprehensive issues had to be

⁹⁹ SHEVERNADZE, E., The Future Belongs to Freedom, London, Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991, p. 108.

¹⁰⁰ DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 198.

dealt with collectively by the Arab participants. In return for a just settlement, a full peace was possible.¹⁰¹ Before the Gulf War, the Reagan administration, supported Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, but concentrated on fostering a bilateral Palestinian-Israeli dialogue, excluding the Soviet Union from the peace process and ignoring Syrian interests in an attempt to peripheralise both states. The American peace initiative collapsed altogether.¹⁰²

A second obstacle to an improvement in US-Syrian relations were the policies conducted by Asad's minority regime. Syria's reputation as a sponsor of terrorist activities severely undermined its relations with the West. A further impediment for closer relations with the West were the hostages retained in Lebanon. The US expected that Asad would use his influence with the Shi'ites in Lebanon to plead for the release of these hostages. Asad was reluctant to do so, but finally in April 1990 - as a result of Asad's interference - the first American hostage was released.¹⁰³

3.5 THE PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON: A CASE STUDY ILLUSTRATING TACTICAL FLEXIBILITY

In this section, the author intends to assess the motivation behind Asad's policies towards the Palestinians in Lebanon. The case study will illustrate how Asad, enjoying relative autonomy, was able to pursue rationally calculated policies with tactical flexibility.

Although there appears to be a lack of coherence in Syria's policies in Lebanon, it is possible to distinguish a certain logic and consistency in these policies, provided that they are put into the context of Syria's strategy in the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 143-144.

¹⁰² DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 197.

¹⁰³ RABINOVICH, I., "Syria in 1990", Current History, January 1991, Vol. 90, No. 552, p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians", Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 1.

At the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, Israel warned Syria not to intervene on behalf of the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinians. Asad took this warning seriously as he did not want to engage in a direct war with Israel.¹⁰⁵ Asad further hesitated to intervene because he wished to maintain the status-quo: on the one hand, Asad wanted to avert the possibility of the Maronites partitioning Lebanon; on the other hand, Asad wished to avoid the establishment of a radical regime in Lebanon by the National Movement and the Palestinians.¹⁰⁶ In both cases, Syria's national security and the regime's survival would be in danger.

In an attempt to maintain a balance between the opposing parties in Lebanon, Asad, in 1976, intervened on behalf of the Christians for which venture he managed to get US and Israeli approval. This intervention was heavily criticised both within Syria and in the Arab world.

"Since 1917, no regime in Syria, whatever its colouring, had taken an anti-Palestinian stand. It was a policy without precedent and alienated wide segments of Syrian opinion."¹⁰⁷

Asad, however, calculated that the dangers involved by not intervening in Lebanon outweighed the risk of a temporary decline in the regime's pan-Arab credentials and legitimacy. Indeed, with his intervention, Asad was able to avert a Christian defeat, which would have led to an Israeli intervention. Moreover, by intervening, Asad prevented the establishment of a radicalised Lebanon that could have provided a fertile base for opposition against the Syrian regime.¹⁰⁸ Asad was also bidding to establish Syria as the arbiter of Lebanon and to acquire the "Lebanese card" for use in Arab-Israeli negotiations.

¹⁰⁵ CHALALA, E., "Syrian Policy in Lebanon, 1976-1984: Moderate Goals and Pragmatic Means", Journal of Arab Affairs, Spring 1985, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 70.

¹⁰⁶ OLSON, R., o.c., p. 152.

¹⁰⁷ BATATU, H., "Syria's Muslim Brethren", MERIP, Nov./Dec. 1982, No. 110, Vol. 12, No. 9, p. 20.

¹⁰⁸ CHALALA, E., l.c., p. 73.

By pacifying Lebanon, Asad was sending a message to Washington that Syria could be a force for regional stability if its interests in a comprehensive peace were not ignored.

In the 1976 crisis, Asad acted with relative autonomy. However, he could not fully ignore the rising discontent within Syria. Therefore, in an attempt to justify his tactical flexibility and to maintain his regime legitimacy, Asad portrayed his actions as being in the interests of the Arab nationalist struggle against Israel. Indeed, if Israel was to gain control in Lebanon, a comprehensive solution based upon UN resolution 242 would appear less likely as Israel would negotiate from a position of strength.

From 1978 onwards, Asad gradually changed alliances. This shift away from the Christian-Rightists was necessary to outmanoeuvre their attempt to establish a Maronite mini-state with the help of Israel. Moreover, after Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and after the failure in the Geneva Conference of 1977 to find a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, an alliance with the PLO seemed more beneficial. Accommodating the United States and Israel, by supporting the Maronites in Lebanon, had failed to deliver an environment for a potential comprehensive settlement; consequently, this policy lost its diplomatic value.¹⁰⁹ Asad, therefore, calculated that if Syria could establish an agreement with the PLO to jointly negotiate the future of the West Bank and the Golan Heights, its bargaining power would increase, whilst the source of domestic discontent would be relieved. According to Hinnebusch¹¹⁰, Syria's ability to "play the Palestinian card", would enable it to obstruct any attempt to settle the Palestinian issue without Syria. In return, Syria promised the Palestinians that it would not sign a peace agreement without an acceptable settlement for the Palestinians. In the meanwhile, Asad refrained from opposing the Christians too openly in order to avoid a full scale war with Israel. Despite this caution, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982.

¹⁰⁹ CHALALA, E., *l.c.*, p. 76.

¹¹⁰ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 4.

Asad, at first, abstained from intervening, fearing a major confrontation with Israel and hoping the invasion would only be of a limited scope. Realising this was not the case, Syria fought back. However, due to heavy losses and the success of Israel's drive northward in the Beka'a valley, which threatened Syria's western flank, Asad accepted a cease-fire, whilst the PLO was still engaged in battle. This incident re-opened old wounds in Syrian-Palestinian relations as the PLO began to doubt the efficacy of its strategic alliance with Damascus.¹¹¹ Although, Syria's position in Lebanon had deteriorated and despite Arafat's belittling of the strategic alliance with Syria, Damascus attempted to present the situation in a positive light. It justified its losses by asserting that it had managed to frustrate the Israeli campaign in Lebanon without assistance, and despite Israel's overwhelming superiority on the ground.¹¹² Damascus needed this justification in order to appease opposition within Syria.

Following the ceasefire in June 1982, Asad faced the challenge of obstructing US efforts to establish a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement along the lines of the Reagan plan. The Reagan plan, was an attempt to establish a separate Israeli-Jordanian peace over the West Bank, but without PLO approval, it was not likely to gain momentum. Arafat, however, in an attempt to counter his dependency upon Syria and seeking to maintain his autonomy, entered into negotiations with King Hussayn on the possibility of the latter representing the PLO in negotiations with Israel over the West Bank.¹¹³ In response to these developments, Asad started to undermine Arafat's position, first by restricting the movements of al-Fatah members in northern Lebanon and the Beq'a, later by supporting the pro-Syrian constituent organisations of the PLO against Arafat's intentions.¹¹⁴ This resulted in the rejection of the Palestinian involvement in the Reagan plan by the Palestine National Council in February 1983.

¹¹¹ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians", Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 11.

¹¹² KARSH, E., Soviet Policy towards Syria since 1970, London, Macmillan, 1991, p. 144.

¹¹³ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians", Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 13.

¹¹⁴ KARSH, E., o.c., p. 149.

Damascus, however, did not restrict its interference in Palestinian affairs to the Reagan plan. When by June 1983, a rebellion from within al-Fatah, headed by Abu Musa, erupted against Arafat's authority, Syria supported the revolt, hoping that the man that had become the obstacle to Syrian control of the PLO would be removed.¹¹⁵ The Syrian backed rebellion led to the retreat of the PLO from Tripoli and a month later the evacuation of the PLO forces from Lebanon; Arafat, however, was not replaced.

The outcome of Asad's conflict with the PLO contained a number of bitter ambiguities. By driving the PLO out of Lebanon and, due to Asad's personal feud with Arafat, Asad failed to acquire control over the "Palestinian card". Syria's need to prioritise its own security and political interest, whilst attempting to dictate Palestinian policies proved to be counter-productive and resulted in an Egyptian-Jordanian-PLO axis.¹¹⁶ Asad also failed to force Israel and the United States to include Syria in a comprehensive peace settlement. Asad, however, did manage to obstruct efforts to draw Jordan and the PLO into separate agreements that excluded Syria. Therefore, one can conclude that Asad, despite his tactical deviations from the conventional notions of Arab nationalism, especially in his intervention against the Palestinians, has remained consistent in the pursuit of his goal to achieve a comprehensive peace based upon UN resolution 242.

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¹¹⁵ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians", Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 17.

¹¹⁶ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians", Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 17.

CHAPTER 4 : 1990-1994: THE OMNIBALANCER II ADAPTING TO A NEW INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

In this chapter, the author intends to portray, how Asad, between January 1990 and July 1994, adapted to the changing international environment. The author of this paper intends to examine the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War on both Syria's internal sphere and its foreign policy.

Although Asad seemingly deviated from Arab nationalist norms, adapting his tactics to the realities of the New World Order, until this date, he had not lost sight of his goal to accomplish a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict based upon UN resolution 242. Increasingly, however, Asad attempted to shift the regime's legitimacy away from ideological legitimacy based on Arab nationalism to legal/rational legitimacy. The result is a combination of both types of legitimacy.

Within Syria, selective liberalisation continues, whilst political decompression is carefully introduced in order to enhance the regime's legal/rational legitimacy and to increase its longevity. Externally, the pursuance of separate deals between the PLO and Israel in September 1993 and between Jordan and Israel in July 1994, have given Syria more room to manoeuvre. Although the Syrian regime continues to adhere to a comprehensive peace, it has now been given the opportunity to settle for a separate peace with Israel over the Golan without losing its Arab nationalist credentials. Whilst considering other potential directions for Syria's foreign policy, the author will refrain from engaging in speculative dialogue.

4.1 LIBERALISATION MEASURES

A major step towards liberalising the Syrian economy took place in May 1991, when Asad signed the Legislative law No. 10.¹¹⁷ Investment law No. 10 was designed to encourage Syrians, expatriates, Arab and foreign investors to invest in foreign currency in any sector of the Syrian economy, except tourism.¹¹⁸ The only restrictions were that the value of the project had to be at least 10 million LS, and that investors had to rely as much as possible on Syrian labour and resources.¹¹⁹ Moreover, each project had to be accepted by the Syrian Higher Council for Investments, which had to give its permission or rejection within 60 days.¹²⁰

The main purpose of law No. 10 was to keep money in Syria, whilst also attempting to attract Syrian money held abroad back into the country.¹²¹ This purpose was only partially successful. Although capital has been invested in trade and services, there seems to be a reluctance and a lack of confidence to invest in long term projects. The main objections of investors are fear of post-Asad instability and corruption.¹²² Therefore, unless other reforms such as the unification of the exchange rate, the establishment of a stock market or banking reforms, are introduced, law No. 10 may have reached its limits.¹²³

Although the 1990s have brought further economic liberalisation, these policies continue to be shaped by the political rationale of maximising regime autonomy rather than the logic

¹¹⁷ "Investment law comes into force", MEED, 17.05.1991.

¹¹⁸ AFFAKI, B.G., "La Loi No. 10 sur la Promotion des Investissements: Une Nouvelle Donnée sur le Marché Syrien", Revue de Droit des Affaires Internationales, 1992, No. 4, p. 385.

¹¹⁹ TURCK, N., "Syria Enacts Law to Encourage Foreign Investment", International Financial Law Review, January 1992, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 36.

¹²⁰ PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed), o.c., p. 20, 22.

¹²¹ Government official, Damascus, July 1994.

¹²² Western diplomat, Damascus, July 1994.

¹²³ Informant, Damascus, July 1994.

of economic rationality, per se. Indeed, if one relies on the economic rationale to explain Syria's liberalisation process and considers it as a crisis-generated policy, one cannot explain why the process has not been abandoned when the general economic situation was improving at the end of the 1980s or after Gulf Arab aid had allowed a further recovery of the Syrian economy after the Gulf War. Indeed, by the time law No. 10 had been introduced, the severe economic crisis of the 1980s had already been solved by aid, oil-revenues and good harvests.¹²⁴ Therefore, some believe that Asad's further liberalisation measures were inspired by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Asad realised that in order to avoid Syria's isolation in the New World Order and to ensure stability within Syria on the long run, he had to gradually move towards a market economy.¹²⁵ Hence, whilst continuing to play off different sections of the bourgeoisie, Asad increasingly allows them to cover the gaps left by the decline of étatism.¹²⁶ Asad, however, in order to eschew instability in the short run and out of fear of what happened in Russia and Egypt, chooses to introduce liberalisation incrementally and in a selective way.¹²⁷ Hence, in order to avoid the Soviet outcome, a strong state is imperative to deliberate over liberalisation. Muhammed Imadi, Minister of Economy and the main architect behind economic liberalisation in Syria, foresees a state regulated market economy with some state intervention and a reduced public sector forced to run on a profit making basis.¹²⁸ In this case, the public sector would receive less subsidies and would have to compete with the private sector. Whilst some public sector companies may be able to compete, others may go out of business.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Western diplomat, Damascus, July 1994.

¹²⁵ Western diplomat, Damascus, July 1994.

¹²⁶ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Asad's Syria and the New World Order: The Struggle for Regime Survival", Middle East Policy Council, May/June 1993, No. 9, p. 5.

¹²⁷ Western diplomat, Damascus, July 1994.

¹²⁸ Interview with M. Imadi, Minister of Economy, Damascus, July 1994.

¹²⁹ Syrian businessman, Damascus, July 1994.

4.2 POLITICAL DECOMPRESSION

Only after the 1980s, it is possible to detect a limited form of political decompression¹³⁰ under the auspices of a corporatist state, which since 1990 included part of the private sector in the political arena, albeit only at a consultative level. It is apparent that the regime elite only restructures its political base to stabilise its regime and to consolidate its legal/rational legitimacy.

Syria's major political reform occurred in May 1990, when a new Parliament was elected. With the acceptance of a greater amount of independent candidates, the regime incorporated into its structures private sector businessmen, independent intellectuals and traditional leaders, thereby partly adjusting to changing socio-economic conditions.¹³¹ Although Parliament is only a quasi-corporatist body invested with consultative powers, and is not meant to function as a counterweight to government,¹³² this reform is another attempt by the regime to broaden its base beyond the Ba'th party. It can be interpreted as an indicator of the further erosion and marginalisation of the Ba'th Party as the central force behind the body politic. An illustration of this downgrading of the Ba'th party can be located in the fact that no party congress has been held since 1985.¹³³ Some believe that Asad does not appear before a party congress because he is angered by the party's criticism on his tactical flexibility in his foreign policy decision-making. It has been suggested by some pundits that Asad will not confront the congress until securing results in the peace process.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Calculated Decompression as a Substitute for Democratisation", Workshop paper, Exeter, March 1994, p. 1.

¹³¹ PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 23.

¹³² PERTHES, V., "Stages of Economic and Political Liberalisation in Syria", in: KIENLE, E. (ed.), o.c., p. 26.

¹³³ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Asad's Syria and the New World Order: The Struggle for Regime Survival", Middle East Policy Council, May/June 1993, No. 9, p. 9.

¹³⁴ Informant, Damascus, July 1994.

Not many pressures from the bourgeoisie for democratisation are likely to emerge as they fear that the inherent inequalities of capitalism may heighten popular discontent and open the way to Islamic fundamentalism as it did in Algeria.¹³⁵ The coopted segments of the bourgeoisie seem prepared not to demand further political reforms in return for business freedom and security; whilst the remaining parts of the bourgeoisie lack the bargaining power.¹³⁶

For the moment, Asad's political decompression seems to be sufficient and there seems to be no reason for Asad to introduce major changes in his established corporatist state. In March 1992, a correspondent from the the Saudi daily Asharq al-Aswat commented:

*"The main feature of the current stage in Syria is political and economic stability. There is no need for radical changes in these two areas."*¹³⁷

Poelling, however, in a Workshop at the University of Exeter in March 1994, suggested that Asad was considering to coopt segments of the business community into his cabinet. If this is the case, it would imply a further incremental step in the broadening of Asad's political basis.

4.3 THE GULF WAR AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

4.3.1 The Gulf War coalition

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 opened new opportunities for Syria and the Middle East peace process.

¹³⁵ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Asad's Syria and the New World Order: The Struggle for Regime Survival", Middle East Policy Council, May/June 1993, No. 9, p. 13.

¹³⁶ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "The Politics of Liberalisation in Syria", Conference Paper, University of Durham, Autumn 1993, p. 6.

¹³⁷ "Don't expect dramatic reforms from Assad", MidEast Mirror, 03.03.1992, p. 13.

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Gulf states, Egypt and Syria assembled and issued a statement condemning Iraq's actions. In the meeting it was decided that a united Arab army would not be established, and therefore Kuwait and Saudi-Arabia called upon the United States for military support. Against all expectations, Syria decided to join the coalition force against Iraq, even mobilising 20,000 troops to Saudi Arabia.¹³⁸ As an Iranian commentator remarked:

"The Syrian stance is a bit surprising. Regardless of its serious economic difficulties, the leadership in Damascus seems to be entering a camp that for years wanted to topple the rule of president Hafiz al-Asad because of his progressive policies and hostility towards the Zionist regime."¹³⁹

In an attempt, however, to placate domestic opinion, Syria claimed it would change sides if Israel would get involved in the conflict. Moreover, Syria demanded that once the inter-Arab crisis was resolved, the foreign forces would withdraw from the region. This allowed Asad to justify his move within Syria as an effort to ensure that the Gulf Arab states would not assume that they could only depend for their security upon international forces. According to Asad, it was therefore the duty of the Arab states to participate in the Gulf War coalition in order to prevent a permanent Western occupation of the Arab Gulf after the crisis.¹⁴⁰

The reasons behind Syria's decision to oppose Iraq during the Gulf War, rather than taking a neutral stand or supporting it, can be explained in a number of ways:

Asad's decision to join the Gulf coalition was largely motivated by his strategy in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Asad condemned Iraq because its invasion of Kuwait caused a

¹³⁸ YORKE, V., "Prospects for peace: the Syrian Dimension", MEI, No. 414, 06.12.1991, p. 16.

¹³⁹ translated fragment out of the Kayhan Int'l newspaper, MidEast Mirror, 01.03.1991, p. 13.

¹⁴⁰ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syria's Role in the Gulf War Coalition", Working Paper, January 1994, p. 13.

diversion of Arab attention and resources from the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁴¹ Realising that Saddam Hussein's ambitions could not be contained through a pan-Arab effort, Asad began to recognise the advantages of a Syrian alliance with the US-led coalition. Asad calculated that supporting the Gulf War coalition would present opportunities for Syria to globally realign itself and thus provide sufficient momentum to enhance the possibility for a resolution of the Israeli occupation of the territories.¹⁴² Indeed, EEC economic sanctions against Syria were lifted and diplomatic relations with Britain restored.¹⁴³ From the United States, Syria gained the promise of an international conference in which a solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict would be pursued on the basis of UN resolutions 242 and 338.¹⁴⁴

A second advantage resulting from Syria's alliance with the coalition was the opportunity it provided for Syria to situate itself at the centre of an Arab security system. This, however, was only possible if Syria did not remain neutral in the conflict. The possibility of the establishment of a common security policy between the GCC states, Egypt and Syria also provides an explanation of Syria's decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia as otherwise a Syrian role in the proposed Damascus Declaration would not be credible.¹⁴⁵

Linked with Asad's second motivation to join the coalition, a third advantage resulted from his policies. In return for sending troops, Saudi-Arabia and the oil-rich Gulf Arab states agreed to compensate Syria up to \$2bn. Today, the original \$2bn appears to have been only a first payment. \$4bn a year, totalling \$13bn, has since been given to Syria.¹⁴⁶ This allowed Syria the possibility to address its adverse economy and to rejuvenate its attempt to attain "strategic parity" with Israel. This doctrine had to a large extent been abandoned

¹⁴¹ "Syrian president offers to send more troops to Gulf if requested", SWB, 14.09.1990.

¹⁴² DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 146.

¹⁴³ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syria's Role in the Gulf War Coalition", Working Paper, January 1994, p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syria's Role in the Gulf War Coalition", Working Paper, January 1994, p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ "Syrian media say conflict is with the Bagdad regime - not the Iraqi people", SWB, 20.02.1991.

¹⁴⁶ Informant, Damascus, July 1994.

after 1987, due to sharply reduced Soviet support.¹⁴⁷ The renewed attention to "strategic parity" and the deterrent effect of a modernising Syrian military, would considerably increase Syria's weight in potential settlements after the Gulf War.

A fourth reason convincing Asad to support the Gulf War coalition, stemmed from the changes in the international environment and the emergence of the New World Order. The breakdown of the bipolar world had caused the disappearance of the Soviet Union as Syria's protector and arms supplier. Hence, Syria was no longer capable of exploiting superpower rivalry in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Therefore, if Asad wished to avoid becoming the next victim in the New World Order, he had to adapt his strategy by re-aligning with the United States, which held the key to a diplomatic settlement.

A final gain for Asad was the green light from France and the United States to promote order in Lebanon.¹⁴⁸ This permitted Syria to launch an offensive against General Aoun, without fear of international recriminations. For months, Syria and Iraq had clashed through their proxies in Lebanon, but neither of the parties succeeded in securing victory. In October 1990, however, Iraq could no longer sustain its financial and military support of Aoun.

One can conclude from this Gulf War episode that Syria deviated from its former pan-Arab agenda. Asad amended his strategy, but not at the expense of his pan-Arab objectives.

Once again, Asad had put his domestic support on the line in the short run in order to conduct his pragmatic policies. In pursuing his objectives, Asad enjoyed only relative autonomy. In order to limit the damage in regime legitimacy, Asad had to justify his foreign policy decision-making within Syria as being ultimately beneficial for the struggle with Israel.

¹⁴⁷ ZIARATI, M., "The Regional Balance of Power in the Air", MEI, 19.11.1993, p. 21.

¹⁴⁸ VAN LEEUWEN, R. & MEIJER, R., Het Midden-Oosten na de Golf (The Middle East after the Gulf War), Berchem, De Geus, 1991, p. 143.

4.3.2 New opportunities

In July 1991, Syria accepted an invitation to join an American peace initiative. Asad, however, had to compromise on the structural organisation of the peace talks and by doing so, complied to all of Israel's demands.¹⁴⁹ Nevertheless, in an interview, Asad explained that he accepted the Bush proposals, because he noticed a greater seriousness by the United States to advance peace than before¹⁵⁰ and furthermore, because the proposals were based upon UN resolutions 242 and 338.¹⁵¹

An international peace conference was established within the framework of a comprehensive and bilateral formula. The conference would convene under the auspices of the United States and the Soviet Union, to set an agenda for the comprehensive and bilateral components of the talks.¹⁵² Afterwards, direct negotiations would take place within a loose framework, with no coercive authority whatsoever. The Palestinians would only participate as part of a joint delegation with the Jordanians.¹⁵³ Although the PLO was not directly represented, Asad commented:

Everything will be done in agreement with the Palestinians, and nothing will be done in isolation from them".¹⁵⁴

Asad's compromise was necessary if he wanted to achieve a solution for the Palestinian-Arab problem. However, this pragmatic approach does not imply a change in his pan-Arab objectives, as the peace talks were still based upon the UN resolutions 242 and 338. Tactically, it was expedient to accept bilateral negotiations considering the new regional

¹⁴⁹ BARAM, H., "A jubilant Shamir gets what he wanted", MEI, No. 405, 26.07.1991, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ "Syrian President's US press interview: there can be no peace without land", SWB, 30.07.1991.

¹⁵¹ "Egyptian-Syrian talks in Damascus on next stage of peace process", SWB, 19.07.1991.

¹⁵² DRYSDALE, A. & HINNEBUSCH, R.A., o.c., p. 147.

¹⁵³ NEFF, D., "Gearing up for round two", MEI, No. 413, 22.11.1991, p. 3.

¹⁵⁴ NEFF, D., "Baker's achievement", MEI, 26.07.1991, p. 5.

environment, the emerging New World Order, and the international momentum after the Gulf War to settle the conflict.¹⁵⁵

"One of the reasons for Asad's procedural turn-about was the recognition that, with no Soviet superpower to turn to and the regional balance shifted in favour of the pro-Western Arab states, Syria had more to gain by playing along with rather than obstructing the US-brokered peace-process."¹⁵⁶

In October 1991, the peace conference convened in Madrid. Both Israel and Arab demands seemed irreconcilable. During the first six months, the peace initiative seemed to be in a deadlock for all parties concerned. There was a large gap between the position of Syria and Israel: Israel declared the Golan non-negotiable and Syria reaffirmed that it would not make peace without Israel's complete withdrawal from the Golan.

Things slowly improved after the installment of a new government in Israel. Officially, Syria persisted in its demand for the Golan's complete evacuation. Unofficially and under increased pressure from the United States to be more conciliatory towards the new Rabin government, Syria held the line that if its sovereignty over the whole Golan were to be recognised then territorial compromises, i.e. demilitarised zones or UN forces, would be acceptable. The announced position of Rabin on the Golan was perceived not to be that different, so that the gap in the divergence of opinions between Syria and Israel - at least unofficially - narrowed.¹⁵⁷ Officially, however, the Israeli Knesset had reaffirmed its rejection of making the Golan Heights negotiable.¹⁵⁸

In the sixth round of talks, Rabin suggested that Syria could always make a separate deal with Israel. This would give Israel the advantage that its main threat - Syria - would be

¹⁵⁵ "Vice-President Khaddam reviews Syria's stance on the peace process", SWB, 23.07.1991.

¹⁵⁶ YORKE, V., "Prospects for Peace: The Syrian dimension", MEI, No. 414, 6.12.1991, p. 16.

¹⁵⁷ JANSEN, G., "Syria: Economic revival, political stalemate", MEI, No. 430, 24.07.1992, p. 15.

¹⁵⁸ DRAKE, L., "The Golan belongs to Syria", MEI, No. 433, 11.09.1992, p. 24.

neutralised. Syria, however, remained consistent with its pan-Arab objectives replying that an Arab settlement with Israel should be comprehensive and exclude separate bilateral peace treaties. Moreover, if Syria would have agreed to negotiate outside the Madrid formula in secret side channels, it would have lost all legal recourse to the UN resolutions on which the conference bases the negotiations.¹⁵⁹

"Syria was now asked by Israel to do exactly what Damascus had been asking the other Arab government not to do."¹⁶⁰

Syria remained resolute in its conviction to enter any peace talks through a multi-lateral medium. Syria's resilience was rewarded with a US-sponsored concession from Israel. Rabin stated:

"I believe that the government that I serve as a prime minister is the first government that accepted the principle of Resolutions 242 and 338, as being applicable to the achievement of peace. No government in the past did so. Which shows that we understand that peace compromises have to be made by both sides."¹⁶¹

An unexpected break-through occurred in September 1993, when the PLO and Israel announced they had been conducting secret talks for eight months. On 13 September, they took the first official steps to recognising each other. The "Gaza and Jericho first plan" was drawn up.¹⁶² This agreement was formalised in Washington between Arafat, Rabin and Clinton.

¹⁵⁹ "Al-Hayat: the Syrian peace-talks strategy", MidEast Mirror, 31.10.1991, p. 25.

¹⁶⁰ JANSEN, G., "Syria's bottom line", MEI, No. 434, 25.09.1992, p. 5.

¹⁶¹ NEFF, D., "Clinton, Rabin and a deal with Syria", MEI, No. 446, 19.03.1993, p. 3.

¹⁶² BUTT, G., "The deal that could change the Middle East", MEI, No. 458, 10.10.1993, p. 3

Syria had always dismissed the idea of a separate peace between itself and Israel on the basis that only a comprehensive pan-Arab settlement was acceptable. Syria further opposed the Oslo agreement as it did not address any of the Palestinian substantive issues such as the end of the occupation, the return for the refugees or Arab right to Jerusalem.¹⁶³ The Oslo agreement transformed the Palestinian cause from a matter of national rights to one of administration over 300 square kilometer, whilst relieving Israel from international pressure for withdrawal of the territories.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, Syria did not conceal its displeasure towards the PLO. In refusing to endorse the agreement, but not rejecting it, Asad distanced himself from the Oslo agreement.

"Asad was clearly not convinced of the wisdom of what Arafat was doing, and was not prepared to be associated with the plan in case it eventually fell apart."¹⁶⁵

Syria maintained its position and continued to stress that the Arab occupied territories should be returned according to the terms of the UN Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and 425. Moreover, Syria stressed that the rights of the Palestinians would remain a top priority despite the policies of the PLO leadership.¹⁶⁶ American, Israeli and PLO hopes were rebuffed as Syria remained resolute to its convictions.¹⁶⁷ Asad was determined to stand firm as long as possible in order to reach an agreement with Israel on the best possible terms. In the meanwhile, Syria waited for Israel or the United States to move towards its terms.

The main point of contention between Israel and Syria stemmed from the fact that Syria wants the total evacuation of the occupied Golan for total peace within a time span of two

¹⁶³ "Syrian press continues its assault on the agreement", MidEast Mirror, 14.10.1993, p. 15.

¹⁶⁴ "Syrian press denounces Arafat faction as 'ally of Israel'", MidEast Mirror, 23.11.1993, p. 10.

¹⁶⁵ BUTT, G., "The deal that could change the Middle East", MEI, No. 458, 10.10.1993, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ "Khaddam: the trap Arafat walked into", MidEast Mirror, 16.11.1993, p. 10.

¹⁶⁷ BUTT, G., "Asad plays for time", MEI, No. 459, 24.10.1993, p. 6-7.

years, whereas Israel believes in a withdrawal from the Golan phased over 5 to 10 years. In the meanwhile, Israel could not reach agreements with its other Arab neighbours, as Lebanon cannot do anything that Syria doesn't want and Jordan, at that time, still claimed it would negotiate, but not sign any agreements before Syria did.¹⁶⁸

In December 1993, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, succeeded in convincing Asad to resume negotiations mid-January 1994. In return for Asad's goodwill, the United States promised Asad a summit in Geneva in January and started to lift its trade restrictions on Syria.¹⁶⁹ Asad agreed with the American proposal, knowing that his meeting with Clinton would commence before the date set for the negotiations with Israel. He could gauge Clinton's seriousness for peace in the Middle East and his willingness to pressure Israel.¹⁷⁰

Asad and Clinton met in Geneva on 16 January 1994. After their summit they expressed their hopes for a break-through in the search for a comprehensive peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Asad explained his perception of peace in the region as follows:

"I see peace with Israel as a strategic choice to secure Arab rights, which enables all peoples in the region to live in security."¹⁷¹

Asad further expressed his will to achieve peace:

"In honour we fought, in honour we negotiate, in honour we shall make peace. We want an honourable peace...for the hundreds of thousands who sacrificed their lives in defense of their nation...We want the peace of the brave, real peace that endures, guarantees the rights of all...If the leaders

¹⁶⁸ "Syria catches the peace train", MEED, 21.01.1994, p. 2.

¹⁶⁹ NEFF, D., "Syria: The United States and Syria", MEI, No. 465, 17.12.1993, p. 8-9.

¹⁷⁰ JANSEN, G., "Syria: A meeting is arranged", MEI, No. 465, 17.12.1993, p. 9.

¹⁷¹ "Asad adds his weight to Middle East peace talks", The Independent, 17.01.1991, p. 1.

of Israel have enough courage to respond...a new age of security, stability and normal peaceful relations will dawn in the region."¹⁷²

Asad's statements underlined the fact that Syria's line spelled out at the start of the peace process in Madrid and, indeed, since Asad's rise to power, had remained unchanged.

A major achievement for Asad, was the fact itself that he had a summit with the American President. It indicated Washington's willingness to endorse the rehabilitation of a country it had long condemned.¹⁷³ Clinton stressed this change in American policy by asserting that:

*"Syria is a key country in the achievement of a comprehensive peace."*¹⁷⁴

This statement provided Asad with a recognition of Syria's role that he had been pursuing for a long time.

When, on 25 July 1994, Jordan and Israel signed a bilateral pact in Washington¹⁷⁵, Syria was confronted with another development which could undermine its aim to be the key country in the provision of a comprehensive peace settlement. Jordan, however, fearing a fierce Syrian reaction, did not sign a full peace treaty, rather a pact of nonbelligerency paving the way for a peace treaty at a later date.¹⁷⁶ The pact includes Israeli-Jordanian agreements on two new border crossings, free passage for tourists, a highway across the

¹⁷² "MidEast breakthrough: Syrian President offers Israel 'normal peaceful relations'", MidEast Mirror, 17.01.1994, p. 4.

¹⁷³ BUTT, G., "Syria: Asad gains maximum benefits for minimal concessions", MEI, No. 467, 21.01.1994, p. 3-4.

¹⁷⁴ "Asad adds weight to Middle East peace talks", The Independent, 17.01.1994, p. 1.

¹⁷⁵ "Rabin et Hussein se retrouvent en paix", La Libre Belgique, 26.07.1994, p. 4.

¹⁷⁶ "M. Rabin et le roi Hussein ont mis fin à l'état de guerre entre leurs deux pays", Le Monde, 27.07.1994, p. 3.

Jordan and economic development of the Jordan valley.¹⁷⁷ However, similar to the PLO-Israeli treaty of Autumn last year, the main critical questions such as the Palestinian refugees who arrived in Jordan in 1948, the future of Jerusalem and the disputed water rights in the Jordan valley, remain unsolved.¹⁷⁸

Surprisingly, Asad's reaction was tempered, whilst offering criticism to the government controlled press in Syria remained somewhat limited. Instead, neutral coverage of the Washington summit, including Rabin's speech, was given both in the newspapers and on Syrian state television.¹⁷⁹ This fact is perceived to be a sign of goodwill towards Israel by the Syrian regime, and a way of preparing public opinion for a potential Syrian-Israeli deal in the future.¹⁸⁰ Asad's defused reaction may also have been caused out of fear to put his cordial relations with the United States on the line, whilst US engagement in the peace process is vital if Syria wants to avoid being isolated. President Clinton, however, had telephoned Asad to reassure him of the American view that Syria is still the key to a Middle Eastern peace.¹⁸¹

The Oslo agreement and the Jordanian-Israeli pact could have major effects on Syria's foreign policy decision-making. Before the PLO went its own way, Asad would not have been able to settle for less than a comprehensive UN 242 settlement, without depriving the Syrian regime from its nationalist legitimacy.¹⁸² Today, however, as the PLO and Jordan concluded their separate deals, Syrian nationalism seems to be ascending at the expense of the Arab nationalist dreams, which are no longer considered to be realistic.¹⁸³ Asad is

¹⁷⁷ "Door opens to Israel-Jordan peace treaty", The Independent, 26.07.1994, p. 20.

¹⁷⁸ "Israel and Jordan end 46-year conflict", The Independent, 26.07.1994, p. 1.

¹⁷⁹ "La carte de la Syrie", Le Monde, 10.08.1994, p. 1.

¹⁸⁰ "Will Syria make it four?", The Economist, 30.07.1994, p. 35.

¹⁸¹ "Will Syria make it four?", The Economist, 30.07.1994, p. 35.

¹⁸² HINNEBUSCH, R.A., "Syrian Foreign Policy and the Peace Process", Unpublished Paper, University of Durham, n.d., p. 6.

¹⁸³ informant, Damascus, July 1994.

respected for not being deferent to the West as King Hussayn is. As the regime's legitimacy gradually shifts away from Arab nationalism and ideology towards more legal/rational legitimacy based on internal liberalisation, stability and prosperity, the regime will no longer be discredited if a settlement for the Golan is the maximum outcome.¹⁸⁴ Although there exists a general feeling of disappointment over the failure of the Arabs to maintain a common front, today, if the regime completes a separate deal with Israel over the Golan, it could still be perceived as having been consistent in its policy objectives.¹⁸⁵ Asad, however, seems in no hurry to follow the formula used with the Palestinians and the Jordanians. Officially, Syria maintains its position of wanting Israel's acceptance of full withdrawal from the Golan and its recognition of full Syrian sovereignty over that area. Only then, will Syria be prepared to end its state of war and be willing to establish normal relations with Israel. Israel from its side, demands Syria's ensurance for normalisation as a condition for further negotiations. Since May 1994, however, Syrian and Israeli views behind the scenes have grown closer.

At the beginning of May, Mr Christopher carried a paper to Damascus containing Israel's ideas about how to meet Syria's demands. Although Syria rejected the proposal, it formulated an alternative set of ideas.¹⁸⁶ Mr Christopher's consequent shuttles to the region seem to have been designed to finesse the two papers into an agreement.¹⁸⁷ These developments have not been impeded by the Jordanian-Israeli pact. Warren Christopher left the region early in August and claimed to come back for a next round in September. He commented that Syria needed some time to digest several Israeli suggestions, but refused to give any further details.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Informant, Damascus, July 1994.

¹⁸⁵ Informant, Damascus, July 1994.

¹⁸⁶ OZANNE, J., "US upbeat on Syrian peace initiative", The Financial Times, 03.05.1994, p. 7.

¹⁸⁷ "Will Syria make it four?", The Economist, 30.07.1994, p. 35.

¹⁸⁸ "Warren Christopher suspend sa médiation entre Jérusalem et Damas", Le Monde, Wednesday 10 August 1994, p. 20.

At this stage, attempting to discuss Asad's strategy any further would accumulate into pure speculation. However, whether Asad makes a separate deal on the Golan or whether he will continue to wait and see what happens with the PLO and Jordan's separate tracks, in each of these scenarios he will have remained consistent with his original goals. In any of these cases, Asad's position both within Syria and in the region can be perceived as the result of his ability to balance between his foreign policy objectives and his regime legitimacy, whilst adjusting to the new conditions enforced on him.

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CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation it has been the contention of the author that Syrian foreign policy decision-making, between 1970 and 1994, has been shaped by mainly two determinants: (i) the Arab nationalist struggle against Israel, and (ii) the preservation of regime legitimacy.

In chapter one, the argument has been advanced that for Third World states which face an external security threat, the Omnibalancing II model appears to be the most viable theoretical framework to examine and understand the roots and dimensions of the foreign policy decision-making process. Moreover, it has been suggested that regimes facing external threats are more likely to transfer the basis of their legitimacy from one largely based upon ideological or neo-patrimonial concerns into legal/rational legitimacy. In chapters two, three and four, the validity of the omnibalancing II model and the legitimacy concepts have been explored and applied to the Syrian case.

The aim of chapter two, was to convey how a leader internally consolidates his state in order to ensure his legitimacy and the survival of the regime, but equally to be able to conduct a foreign policy with relative autonomy. In Syria, President Hafiz al-Asad, after seizing power in November 1970 and motivated by a political rationale, set about creating a quasi-corporatist state structure whilst attempting to broaden the regime's social base. One can chart the course of Asad's changing base through identifying the transitions within the corporatist structures of the state. The public sector represented the main partner of the state in the early 1970s, their role has been superseded by a bourgeois contingent, since in the mid-1980s. Asad, through policies of economic liberalisation and political restructuring, coopted new elements into the regime's domestic constituency without, as yet, expelling his original supporters. This policy was accompanied by a

gradual shift from ideological legitimacy towards a combination of neo-patrimonial/ideological legitimacy. It enhanced Asad's ability to balance above society and enabled him to preserve the autonomy to pursue his foreign policies relatively unconstrained by domestic opposition.

Chapter three concentrated upon the external aspect of Syria's policies, between 1970 and 1990, and examined how Asad since his seizure of power in 1970 remained consistent in the pursuance of his redefined pan-Arab goal. He pursued an "honourable" settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in which peace with Israel could only be achieved if it withdrew from the lands conquered in 1967. Although Asad's main objective remained consistent, his position of relative autonomy from domestic constraints allowed him a deviation in the use of strategy and tactics when attempting to maximise his power in the regional environment. Whilst sometimes violating the Arab nationalist norms with his pragmatic foreign policy decision-making, as illustrated with his conflict with the Palestinians, Asad always justified his actions as being in the name of the ultimate objective of a comprehensive peace. This justification was essential as Asad was restrained by the merits of relative autonomy and had staked the legitimacy of his regime on the achievement of his pan-Arab goal. Being an omnibalancer, Asad was able to temporarily ignore domestic opinion in his foreign policy decision-making; however, in the long run, Asad had to find an equilibrium with his foreign policy in order to maintain a degree of ideological legitimacy necessary for his regime's survival.

Chapter four linked the impact of the New World Order and the Gulf crisis to adaptations in both Syrian domestic and foreign policy, suggesting that Asad in order to maintain a degree of regime legitimacy had to adapt to the new situation and accelerate the transition to legal/rational legitimacy. Asad, therefore, by moving towards a market economy and taking further steps to establish a more liberal institutionalised state, is gradually shifting the basis of his regime's legitimacy away from ideology towards more legal/rational legitimacy. This shift is necessary to ensure regime survival, as after a potential peace settlement with Israel, ideological legitimacy as the core of Syria's regime legitimacy will become less viable.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and especially after the Gulf War, Asad adapted his tactics to the new international environment, but has remained consistent in his goal to achieve a comprehensive peace with Israel on the basis of UN resolution 242. Before the PLO and Jordanian separate deals with Israel, no other policy would have been possible without severely straining the legitimacy of the Syrian regime. The development of the PLO and Jordanian tracks, has displaced some of Syria's responsibility to the Palestinians. Interestingly, it has stimulated Syrian nationalism amongst the public opinion and cleared the way for Asad to make a deal with Israel on the Golan without damaging his nationalist legitimacy. In view of the changing regional and international environment, however, it has become more necessary for Asad to replace the regime's ideological legitimacy with a legal/rational legitimacy.

In conclusion, Asad, between November 1970 and July 1994, has constructed a stable state by broadening the support base of the regime and by adapting the ingredients of his regime's legitimacy mix according to threats and opportunities both within Syria and in the international arena. By carefully balancing internal and external threats, Asad has been able to pursue his consistent foreign policy goals with tactical flexibility, whilst ensuring his internal legitimacy.

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