Syrian Foreign Policy Toward Iran:
A Strategic Relationship or Tactical Convergence?

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INTRODUCTION

Syria, a resource-poor, mid-size country, "exercises power out of proportion to its natural endowments."[1] This paper intends to explore this phenomenon, arguing that systemic determinants catalyzed by external actors, namely Israel, rather than ideological variables, drive Syrian foreign policy. The relationship between Syria and Iran will be used as a case study, presenting a complex relationship from which to explore the nature of the Syrian regime and its foreign policy imperatives. The "strategic impasses" relevant to this discussion include the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the Lebanese civil war and the rise of Hezbollah (1982-2000), as well as the Israeli-Arab Peace Process (1991-2000).

UNDERSTANDING THE DETERMINANTS OF SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Scholars have characterized Syrian foreign policy during the rule of Hafez al-Assad as the epitome of realist strategy. Policy at this time was based on maximization of state power in the anarchic regional and international milieu, which lacked a "strong ideological dimension."[2] By asserting "Machiavellian skill in exploiting every available resource," Assad succeeded during his thirty years of rule to consolidate state institutions and adapt to rapidly changing regional and international circumstances to further Syrian state interests.[3] This task was never easy. Assad employed a myriad tools, ranging from diplomacy and political subversion to savage repression in an effort to increase Syrian power. [4]

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Syria's ability to project power well beyond its expected limits can be attributed to Assad's political and strategic acumen, best exemplified by his

creative exploitation of the Israeli-Arab conflict to suit Syrian state interests, which in many ways reflected the Syrian regime's own interest of survival and maximization of political power. Assad's hostile relationship with Israel stemmed primarily from a fear of Israeli military capabilities and the threat it poses to Syrian influence rather than any ideological determinant that might otherwise drive Syrian decision-making.[5] Outstanding Syrian claims to the Golan Heights, as well as concerns regarding Israeli ambitions in Lebanon, and later Israeli economic hegemony, were the driving factors of Assad's fears.

Syria's elastic relationship with Iran has served Syrian interests vis-à-vis its struggle with Israel by repeatedly strengthening Syria's regional posture. The evolution of the Syrian-Iranian relationship serves as a case study by which to evaluate the analyses of Assad and Syrian foreign policy behavior. It also provides historical framework for evaluating the current regime of Bashar al-Assad and future trends in Syrian foreign policy decision-making. In light of contemporary geo-political developments in the Middle East, the exact nature and history of the Syrian-Iranian relationship deserves greater attention and scrutiny.

From both a structural and ideological level, these two states could be viewed as polar opposites. However, the repeated convergence of interests has enabled continued, if uneven, cooperation between the two nations. Syria has based its actions on rational self-interests, at times abandoning its alignment with Iran and working in opposition to Iranian interests. This by no means disregards the use of ideology as a rhetorical and tactical tool of the state to further its underlying goals. To the contrary, such tools continue to cloak many of the actions of state behavior.

Early Syrian Relations with post-Shah Iran, 1979-1987

The ruling regimes of Syria and Iran have remained relatively consistent since 1979. Allied with Israel and the United States as well as wielding the fifth-largest army in the world, Mohammed Reza Shah, Iran's ruler prior to 1979, had the potential to project substantial force in the region. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad even perceived Iranian-Israeli cooperation as creating a "hold on the Arab world."[6] The collapse of the Western-oriented autocrat in the Iranian revolution profoundly changed the normative operating environment for Syria. As a testament to its support for the new, fervently anti-Zionist Iran, Syria became the second country after the USSR to recognize the Iranian revolutionary regime.[7]

On September 22, 1980, shortly after the revolutionary regime came

to power, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, abrogating the 1975 Algiers Agreement based on a pretext of Iranian non-compliance.[8] The revolutionary Iranian regime and Assad's Syria now shared another important strategic concern that transcended their myriad differences. Both regimes viewed Iraq as a threat to their interests. Syria had two distinct, yet intertwined reasons for aligning with Iran during what became known as the Iran-Iraq War, or the first Gulf War. First, Iraq was a larger and more powerful neighbor vying with Syria for a leadership role in the Arab world. Second, and more importantly for this research, Iraq's invasion of Iran diverted attention and resources away from Syria's struggle in the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Iraq and Syria were both run by Arab, autocratic regimes that espoused Ba'athist ideology as a tool for legitimacy, making them two of the most similar regimes in the region. Yet, the two states saw each other more as competitors than as natural allies.[9] The 1966 split of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party into two factions, centered in Baghdad and Damascus respectively, led to a fierce rivalry between the countries.[10] Other events, such as Iraq granting asylum to Michel Aflaq, a prominent exiled Syrian political figure, further complicated Iraqi relations with Syria.[11] Despite a brief period of rapprochement between the two countries at the 1978 Baghdad Conference, enmity between Syria and Iraq vigorously resurfaced when Hussein blamed Syria for a coup plot uncovered just before the Iran-Iraq War.[12] In this environment, a realist prediction would follow that Syria should support Iran to weaken Iraq.

The second rationale for Syria's support of Iran was the loss of the immense aid and political capital that Syria had gained in 1978 at the Baghdad Conference. Although still supporting Syria, the Gulf States, the major contributors of aid, became consumed by the more proximal threat now posed by the Iranian revolutionary regime, diverting their resources to Iraq.[13] Plans for a redoubled Arab (Iraqi-Syrian) effort to confront Israel in the wake of Egypt's withdrawal from hostilities in 1978 were abandoned. The Iran-Iraq War in fact appeared to benefit Israel at the expense of Syria and other Arab states, as it "used up Arab oil wealth, and neutralized the oil weapon."[14] Assad was left to contend with a robust Israeli military alone, and with little resources or political support at his disposal. In this situation it was a rational move for Syria to align itself with the Iranian regime, which was taking an aggressive rhetorical and material posture against Israel.

The decision to align with Iran had negative implications for Syria within the Arab state system. First, this move was antithetical to the concept of

Arab unity, as it was an overt alliance with a non-Arab (Persian) state against an Arab neighbor. This choice might have threatened the Syrian regime regionally and domestically, as propaganda efforts and subversion by Iraq could have riled up Arab neighbors and Syrians themselves.[15]

The decision to align with Iran was not a *fait accompli*. Syria did have other policy options, namely aligning with the other Arab states. This would have prevented Syria's isolation, balanced the country against Iran, and aided the creation of a "new Arab order." However, such an Arab alliance would require that Syria surrender some degree of authority and power to Iraq or Saudi Arabia, which was anathema to Assad's regime.[16]

This interpretation would suggest that at times of decision-making, state security and power implications trumped ideological considerations. The opportunity to align against a proximal threat, Iraq, with limited repercussions appeared to enhance Syria's position vis-à-vis other Arab states. Rather than become another element of the Arab front by siding with Iraq, Syria leveraged its relationship with Iran to act as an interlocutor between Iran and the Arab states, thereby making Syria more relevant to both parties in the conflict.[17] The reality of overwhelming Arab rejection of the Islamic Republic in Iran by default made Syria a conduit for interaction between the Arab Republic and Iran. Lastly, Syria experienced isolation from most of the Arab world that impacted its subsequent decision-making process. Signing a formal treaty with the USSR in 1980 in return for much needed military aid signaled an unprecedented acquiescence to foreign influence on the part of Assad.[18] Such a move appeared to be a hedge against possible fallout from supporting Iran and came at the price of sacrificed autonomy. In fact, by the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Libya, itself a pariah in the Arab and international communities, was Syria's only Arab ally.[19]

As the conflict progressed between Iraq and Iran, Syria maintained its cooperation with Iran to the detriment of the Iraqi war effort. Most notably, Syria amassed troops on the Iraqi border, shut down an Iraqi pipeline that passed through Syria, and funneled much-needed weaponry from the Soviet bloc to Iran.[20] Syria, in return, received oil from Iran "on very favorable terms."[21] However, once Assad broke with Iraq and the Arab front, Syria became wedded to the Iranian war effort for more than immediate material gain. An Iraqi victory meant Iraqi military-economic hegemony in the Gulf and Iraqi political dominance in Arab affairs. The result would be absolute political defeat for Syria in the Arab political system, as Syria would be weaker in real terms and discredited for supporting a non-Arab regime.

As the stalemate continued between the two belligerent parties, attempts were made at Syrian-Arab League reconciliation. The Amman Summit in

1987 offered Syria substantial financial inducements to yield support for "resolutions proclaiming solidarity with Iraq against Iran."[22] This decision, a tactical calculation based on immediate need, led to a cooling of Syrian-Iranian relations. The reintegration of Egypt into the Arab community after its 1979 peace treaty with Israel also presented a bitter pill for Assad to swallow. It brought a larger, more powerful state back into mainstream Arab affairs, helping to further marginalize Syria.

Syrian-Iranian Involvement in Lebanon and the Rise of Hezbollah, 1982-1990

Less than two years after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, another crisis emerged that engaged Syria and, to a lesser, albeit substantial degree, Iran. Ostensibly to rid southern Lebanon of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) guerrillas, an Israeli mission in 1982 rapidly morphed into a full-scale military intervention. The fighting put Israeli troops in direct confrontation with Syrian forces, who had maintained a presence in Lebanon since 1976. After an ignominious defeat by Israel, Syrian forces retreated from Beirut and consolidated their forces in the south of Lebanon.

In the wake of this defeat, Syria revised its strategy and scored a significant political, if not military,

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victory against Israel. After a major re-supply of arms from the USSR, Syria was able to maintain its military posture in Lebanon.[23] However, instead of confronting Israel directly, Syria began to beef up its support to various Lebanese allies, mostly Muslim groups, in their struggle against Israel and its Lebanese Christian allies.[24] By 1983, Syria marshaled enough support to de-legitimize the nascent Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty. It gradually reasserted political and military influence in Lebanon through its support of different Shiite, Palestinian, and Druze factions, to the detriment of both Israeli and American interests.[25] Rising casualties in the civil war led to a complete American and limited Israeli withdrawal, heralding a victory for Assad by the end of 1983. This success catapulted Assad from pariah to popular hero throughout the Arab world.

During the Lebanese civil war, Syrian and Iranian interests again coincided

in their mutual support of the Shiite militia factions in Lebanon. Initially supportive of the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon to expel the PLO, the Shiites quickly turned sides as they saw the Israelis becoming a more permanent occupation force. This development provided Syria with another avenue by which to challenge the Israelis. While Assad also recognized the value of the Shiite community to Iran, for his own interests in Lebanon he sought to maintain control over the Shiite, as well as other factions. He was never completely successful in this pursuit, as too overt a show of control could have subverted Syrian-Iranian relations.[26]

Syria, by virtue of its geographical proximity to Lebanon and overt military presence in the country, has always acted as the "gatekeeper" for Iranian-Lebanese Shiite relations. This situation created a tenuous balance for Syria and Iran. Without Syrian approval, it would have been nearly impossible for Iran to support the Lebanese Shiite.[27] Allowing the introduction of Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops in 1982 to strengthen and train the Shiite militias was a potentially compromising move for Assad. Due to the presence of Israeli forces in southern Lebanon, the placement of Iranian soldiers in Lebanon, at a minimum, compelled greater Syrian vigilance of their activities. Additionally, a profound consequence of the presence of the Revolutionary Guard was their instigation of Shiite Amal militia members to splinter off and form their own, more radical group, Hezbollah.[28]

The incubation of Hezbollah represented a new tool for Assad to further Syrian foreign policy imperatives. Though Israel withdrew its forces to the so-called "security-zone" in southern Lebanon in 1985, the Shiite in the area resented the continued Israeli presence and subsequently mounted a low-intensity guerrilla war against the Israeli military. Unsuccessful at challenging the Israeli military directly, Syria now found itself supporting an effective proxy force that bogged down the Israeli military and diminished its threat. Although never fully in control of Hezbollah, and even at times susceptible to "periodi[c] challenges of [its] authority" by the group, Syria benefited immensely from the active military presence of Hezbollah against Israel during the later stages of the Lebanese civil war (1985-89) and beyond.[29]

Not all analysts agree that the interests of Syria and Iran aligned during this period. By virtue of its geography and shared border, Syria was more vulnerable to Israeli attack than Iran. Syrian manipulation of Hezbollah and other proxies in southern Lebanon was intended as leverage against the Israelis, with the hope of eventually reaching a settlement, which differed strategically from Iranian goals. In fact, Iranian-Hezbollah instigated hostage-taking damaged Syria's image at a time when it was trying to appear as a moderating influence in Lebanon. During the period of the civil war,

Syria saw Hezbollah "as a threat and an opportunity….[having] a more ambivalent and sometimes quite hostile relation with it."[30]

Syria's decisions regarding Hezbollah were gambles based on strategic calculations. On the one hand, Syria was able to use Hezbollah against Israel, its greatest strategic threat and avowed enemy. Yet, at the same time the increased strength of Hezbollah, as well as an increased Iranian presence in Lebanese affairs, had the potential to undermine Syrian interests in Lebanon and with Israel. Autonomous Hezbollah attacks could have elicited robust Israeli reprisals against Syria. At first transecting in interests with Iran, Syria found itself in need of controls to curb attempts at Iranian hegemony in Lebanon, which represented the successful "export" of the Islamic revolution. Although the goals of Hezbollah shifted quickly from the messianic to the more practical, Iran has continued to maintain an interest in supporting Hezbollah.[31] By the end of the civil war, Syria learned to play Hezbollah off of its rival, Amal, to better control both groups.[32] By this time, however, Syria was in a more compromised regional position that compelled the regime to reconsider its strategic priorities beyond its near abroad in Lebanon.

THE POST-COLD WAR MILIEU AND THE ISRAELI-ARAB PEACE PROCESS (1989-2000)

By 1989-90, Assad's regime found itself in a nadir. The Iran-Iraq War had ended in an ignoble stalemate, with Syria having to make an about-face to rejoin the Arab community. The organic character of the first Palestinian *intifada* prevented Syria from influencing it and "punctured" Assad's image as defender of the Palestinians.[33] Most importantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union ended a fairly consistent stream of aid that had buttressed Syrian militarily and economically for the entirety of Assad's reign. As Barry Rubin appropriately stated in 1990:

> Indeed Syria is the most notable Arab loser from the changing regional picture. As if Syria's domestic problems, economic difficulties, Lebanese imbroglio and regional political isolation were not bad enough, it is also the Arab state most dependent on Soviet support. Egypt's potential power comes from its size, high degree of internal integration and U.S. patronage; Iraq, on the other hand, has oil wealth. But Damascus' main strategic asset was its status as the leading Soviet client in the Middle East.[34]

Lastly, because it took a more inward approach to the new era and removed itself from the regional and international spotlight, Iran had very little to offer to Syria in economic assistance. These circumstances presented Assad's

regime with a quandary: How to make itself relevant in this new epoch?

The US opposition to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait presented Syria with its first opportunity to redefine itself. Though not a historic friend of the US, Assad recognized the reality of the new unipolar world and America's leading role in it. Assad accepted the offer to join a US-led coalition to compel Iraq to leave Kuwait. Syria had consistently viewed Iraq as a threat, and if the United States was willing to carry the burden of curtailing that threat, then it would appear within Syrian interests to support American efforts. Syria was also receptive to other positive incentives, such as the possibility of receiving US aid and other economic benefits. Iran supported US efforts, however coldly, for similar reasons. Supporting the liberation of Kuwait also gave Syria the opportunity to ingratiate itself with other Arab states and shed the aforementioned isolation produced in the 1980s, while also providing cover to brutally consolidate power in Lebanon during the final period of the civil war.[35]

Post-Gulf War realignments served to diverge Syrian interests from those of Iran. The 1992 Damascus Declaration realigned Syria in a security arrangement with other Arab Gulf States and Egypt.[36] US pressure brought Syria back to peace talks with Israel that had halted after the 1974 Disengagement Agreement.[37] As one official intimate with the negotiations noted, Assad went on to participate in the Madrid Framework "as much to build a new relationship with the Americans as to arrive at a settlement with Israel and regain the Golan Heights."[38] Regardless, Assad's choice to join the Madrid Framework and restart negotiations with Israel reflected a profound divergence of interest with Iran, who opposed the talks but provided no counter-incentive to support Syria financially or offer an alternative to the wider Arab-Israeli peace process.

The peace talks between Israel and Syria, which lasted from August 1992 to March 1996 and then late 1999 until ultimately collapsing in March 2000, demonstrated Assad's versatility at adapting to changing geopolitical circumstances.[39] Unlike the Palestinians who had more complex disagreements with Israel surrounding questions of identity, nationhood, and historical narratives, Syria had a straightforward goal: a return of territory, specifically the full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, which Israel had captured in 1973 from Syria.[40] Syrian irredentism could therefore more easily be reconciled through a peaceful process rather than continued military endeavors.

Again, the issue of negotiation with Israel during this period is widely open to debate, as many scholars argue that Assad's participation in negotiations with Israel was a mere façade to continue its relationship with

the United States. Repeated invocation of the defense of Arab dignity and pride as an excuse to delay negotiations or forestall the implementation of a commitment, indicated that Syria did not regard peace as "an urgent matter" during that period.[41] Such an assessment would support the hypothesis that Syria was making a tactical sacrifice to achieve the larger, more strategic goal of improved economic ties with the United States. Furthermore, Syria continued its "tenacious manipulation of every possible leverage at [its] command." Assad continued to employ Hezbollah as a proxy to foster disorder, particularly at times when negotiations were becoming unfavorable to Syria.[42] This can be seen most apparently in two limited operations undertaken by Israel against Hezbollah, Operation Accountability in 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996. In the latter conflict, Israel actually attacked a Syrian outpost in Lebanon, resulting in the death of one Syrian soldier.[43] In the wake of the second operation, Syria was able to assert greater influence as a party to the "April Understanding" of 1996.[44]

The legitimacy of the Syrian regime came into question during its negotiations with Israel. Assad's Alawite-ruling clique, lacked broad-based support within Syria, in part due to the country's predominantly Sunni population. Because of this, a bold foreign policy move such as peace, or even peace talks, with Israel risked potential disaster for the regime. Negotiations, therefore, were a difficult and tenuous balance for Assad, requiring him to maintain good relations with the US while trying to restore Syrian territory and at the same time appeasing a domestic constituency that would not accept compromise or weakness vis-à-vis Israel.

Hafez al-Assad's death came just after the collapse of Israeli-Syrian negotiations and on the eve of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in the spring of 2000. Hezbollah claimed a resounding victory and many, particularly in the Arab world, saw Israel's retreat as a defeat. Iranian support of Hezbollah has increased significantly since the withdrawal of Israeli forces, raising further fears of Iranian hegemony in Lebanon, as the Shiite were emboldened by their actions against Israel. These circumstances and changing events of the Middle East once again presented new realities to Syria and Bashar al-Assad, Hafez's son and successor.

Syria Since 2000

Syria has undergone significant transformations since the transition of leadership and the withdrawal of Israel from southern Lebanon. Syria itself has withdrawn militarily from Lebanon. The latest war in Iraq has altered

the regional balance of power again and has helped to establish a prolonged American presence in the region. Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel still remain the three primary fronts of Syrian-Iranian interaction. These recent developments provide ample opportunity to test the viability and applicability of Hafez al-Assad's realist strategies in maximizing Syrian strategic state interests. Aside from the experiment with the "Damascus Spring" in 2000-2001, a brief period of substantive reform in Syria, it appears that Bashar al-Assad plans to continue the autocratic, realpolitik legacy of his father.

The much publicized Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 changed Syrian foreign policy considerations with its neighbors. With their withdrawal, Syrian forces lost the direct power to guide elements such as Hezbollah. However, as an irredentist state, Syria still views Lebanon as a territory within its sphere of influence and maintains a sizable, albeit more covert presence there. Structural imperatives compel Syria to retain maximum influence in Lebanon, while cautiously waiting for a pretext to return and reassert greater influence. As Gambill argues, the economic value of Lebanon to Syria, in terms of Syrian employment, remittances and benefits from corruption, will provide yet another reason for Syria to return to more overt control in Lebanon.[45] Current turmoil in Lebanon may indeed invite a more robust Syrian presence in the near future.

Although on the surface their interests may seem to align now more than at any time in the past, due to current instability in the region, Syria and Hezbollah may begin to assert more distinct policy imperatives. As Hezbollah now directs its efforts at political consolidation in Lebanon, it may have the potential to exercise a greater check to Syrian involvement in Lebanon. The events in the summer of 2006 demonstrate the degree to which Hezbollah no longer exercises only operational autonomy, but now also strategic decision-making.[46] Hezbollah's political aspirations within Lebanon may cause a divergence of interest with Syria, as Hezbollah appears to be gradually eclipsing the pro-Syrian Amal factions in power and popularity amongst the Shiite of Lebanon.[47]

The events in Iraq since 2003 have also presented a challenge to Syria. The decision by Bashar al-Assad's regime to oppose American intervention in Iraq in 2003 represented a potentially disastrous gamble for the new leader. Such a decision would have rested on the normative assumption that there existed a reasonable expectation of Iraqi-Hussein victory. However, many questions have arisen about Bashar al-Assad's political acumen, particularly when compared with his father's leadership capabilities. Support for the insurgency and the fomenting of further instability on its eastern border carries the potential for blowback against the minority Alawite regime as its

fighters may return to challenge its legitimacy. Based on this supposition, the current state of affairs in Iraq would compel Assad to actively curb support for the insurgency and work with various interests in the region to stem radicalism before it spreads into Syrian territory.

The war in Iraq and the war this summer in Lebanon appear to have strengthened Syrian-Iranian relations. In the current anarchic state of affairs within Iraq, both Syria and, to a larger degree, Iran have the opportunity to exploit the turmoil in order to further their interests. They can doubly subvert American efforts at nation-building and weaken the US presence in the region. The reignition of the Israeli-Arab conflict in July/August 2006 brought Syria out of diplomatic isolation with the United States. Talk of the West putting a wedge between Syria and Iran, and curbing Hezbollah, serves as testament to Syria's increasing relevance.[48]

Syria and Iran's renewed cooperation will continue to accelerate. Both states are treated as pariahs by the West and are finding friends in other powers, such as Russia. Insofar as the benefits of aligning with Iran outweigh a shift to the West, Syria has no material incentive to discredit itself in the realm of Arab and international opinion.[49] Numerous inducements have been offered to try and break the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Yet, such a shift has yet to occur. Syria's geostrategic position as a logistical lifeline to Hezbollah, Iran's client and proxy against Israel, makes Syria all the more relevant, further reducing its likelihood to dramatically change its alliance. The summer 2006 war helped propel a damaged and discredited Assad to the forefront of politics in the Middle East, as the pivotal link between the two figures most highly revered at the moment: Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Again, change in the Arab-Israeli conflict has shown to reverse Assad's circumstances. His pragmatism trumps religious or ideological differences between Shiite Iran and secular, Alawite Syria. Relations could deteriorate if US policy shifts to engagement rather than isolation and the strategic benefits of support from the US outweigh those of Iran. At this point, however, such opportunities for change remain unlikely, at least in the current US administration.

Syrian foreign policy imperatives, rooted in the Israeli-Arab conflict and constrained by domestic considerations, have appeared remarkably consistent and coherent since the late 1970s. Syria, under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, has had to consistently alter its tactics to remain pertinent in a competitive geopolitical milieu where it lacks the natural endowments for power that many of its neighbors possess. Despite this impediment, Syria has nonetheless remained central to the unfolding events throughout the region, including in Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel, over the past decades. Its

relationship with Iran presents one of the most appropriate manifestations of realpolitik foreign policy decision-making to further Syrian interests. The current political outlook supports a continued and strengthened Syria-Iran relationship.

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