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THESIS

**ASAD'S SYRIA AT THE CROSSROADS:
STRATEGIC AND POLITICAL CULTURE vs. NEW
WORLD ORDER**

by

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December 1998

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The collapse of the Eastern Bloc and Soviet Union marked the end of a painful era in history. As the 20th century draws to a close, mankind is busy establishing a common world in which nations can understand each other more easily than in the Cold War. Peace, democracy, and free market economy are the cornerstones of this new order. However, Syria is still anti-democratic, economically backward and a conflict-prone state.

The main thesis of this work is that Syrian political and strategic culture is one of the major obstacles to Syria's transformation into a democratic, peaceful and prosperous country. The most immediate problem faced by Syria is the urgency for liberalization at home and peace in the region. However, President Hafiz al-Asad's personal way of thinking, the Ba'th ideology, and the political system all impede Syria from undergoing necessary structural transformations and concluding the Middle East peace process with a viable peace agreement. This is because liberalization and peace put the survival of Asad's dictatorship at stake. As a result, it is plausible to argue that Syria will not be a partner of the new world order as long as Asad or his clique remains in power.

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STRATEGIC AND POLITICAL CULTURE vs. NEW WORLD ORDER**

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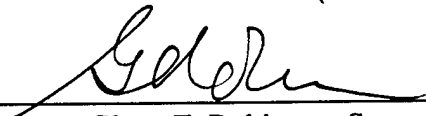
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DISCLAIMER

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I. INTRODUCTION

As the century draws to a close, the Middle East, like many regions of the world, is about to go through fundamental changes in political and economic terms. These changes, especially since the unexpected demise of the Cold War, have made hopes blossom for the future of the region, which is notorious for its lasting instability and economic malaise. Political and economic openings of some Middle Eastern regimes, although insignificant for the time being, and the Peace Process, initiated after the Gulf War, are the main sources of these optimistic expectations.

There is no doubt that Syria has proved to be one of the key players in Middle East politics. Following Egypt's defection from the Arab solidarity against Israel in 1979, Syria under Hafiz al-Asad took the lead of the Arab world in this struggle. The Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, coupled with Jordan and Lebanon's tendencies to compromise with Israel, reduced the half century-old Arab-Israeli struggle practically to a Syrian-Israeli border conflict. In other words, the two countries are the major actors of the Peace Process. Their commitment to a permanent peace is of great importance in terms of overcoming the present deadlock.

In this respect, the future of Syria becomes a matter of concern for Middle East area scholars and political analysts throughout the world. There are two possible scenarios for Syria's future. Syria can survive as a stable and developing country if it adapts itself to new global and regional conditions. Otherwise, it may end up a weak country incapable of coping with contemporary challenges. A number of works concerning this subject have been done by prominent area specialists, and they have appeared in a wide variety of publications.

This study, too, is going to deal specifically with the near future of Syria. The primary difference between this study and others is, perhaps, the methodology which is employed in order to be able to make plausible predictions about Syria's near future. The central question that will be addressed is: "How can the Syrian regime respond to contemporary challenges?" This study simply argues that there are vital problems that demand immediate decisions from the Syrian ruling elite. From this perspective, what will shape Syria's future are those strategic decisions. Therefore, one who intends to make such a study has to be familiar with the existing decision-making mechanism of Syria. In order to do that, the first part of the work will aim at examining the roots and essential features of Syria's political and strategic culture under Asad. The concept of "strategic culture" has been used to explain possible differences in strategic behavior or operational choice of different nations. Chapter two will address a specific question: "Is there a distinct national way of thinking for the Syrian elite?" Among other things, of course, political culture has a great impact on the formation of the strategic culture in a given nation or country. In sum, through a longitudinal analysis primarily covering Asad's tenure, it may be possible to obtain some clues about Syrian responses to certain kinds of problems.

There are three sets of views regarding the concept of strategic and political culture. The proponents of the concept strongly argue that there is always a distinctively national mode of strategic thinking of each nation, ruling elite, or regime. In other words, some deeply rooted cultural elements determine the strategic or political behaviors of the nations. The opponents of the concept totally reject that idea. In contrast, they claim that culture has nothing to do with the way a nation or group behaves. Differences in strategic

behavior can be explained solely in terms of objective differences in domestic and external conditions. A third view is somewhere in between them. This school admits that cultural or ideational elements and realist conditions together affect behavioral choices. This study uses this approach. In order to describe the strategic orientation of the Syrian elite, both cultural and realist components will be taken into account.

The initial findings of this research suggest that Syrian regime is a basic one-man rule of Asad, and the whole strategic decision-making system is run by him. His strategic and political orientation is adamantly realist. At the same time, he does not totally ignore some idealist motives of popular and political culture.

The second part, which is fundamental to this study, deals with Syria's present problems. The new challenges to the Syrian regime will be described in this part. These challenges can be sorted out in two broad groups: internal and external questions. The study will cover only vital issues that have to be dealt with at the strategic level.

The main internal question faced by Syria now is the urgency of economic and political liberalization. Exacerbated by the decline of the communist bloc that was nursing Syria during the Cold War era, the lingering economic crisis brought the country to the brink of a total bankruptcy in the late 1980s. It was President Asad who stopped this free fall by joining the anti-Iraq coalition in the Gulf War. Although his pro-West stand created an optimistic atmosphere about the future of the country, few things have changed in Syria since then.

In the third chapter, a mixture of the concept "strategic culture" and a modified version of the "political economy theory" will be used as a theoretical base for explaining regime change. The political economy theory accounts for the dynamics of regime

change. More clearly, it illustrates how an incumbent regime survives a crisis, especially economic, or falls apart as a result of it. This approach acknowledges the fact that regime change ultimately depends on the strategic choices of the key actors, but socio-economic structural conditions substantially direct their actions. The founders of this view argue that an authoritarian regime's survivability largely depends on regime type (ideology), elite cohesion, and external rent. External rent, especially foreign aids, in the case of Syria has been insignificant recently, and in steady decline. Thus, the remaining two factors, ideology and elite cohesion, overlap with the idea of "strategic and political culture."

There are several reasons to explain Syria's obstinate resistance to liberalization, which is indispensable to its survival in the 21st century's environment. This study argues that the ideology, although in transition, and the elite are still continuing to keep the existing regime alive. The Syrian leadership has confidence in the system, and believes that the founding principles still preserve their so-called correctness.

First of all, the major beneficiaries of Ba'th rule, such as minorities, the peasantry, and public sector managers, are afraid of losing their favorable positions in a possible democratic regime. Second, the existing economic system already created an alliance between its clients. The main beneficiaries of the economic system are the patronage network or corrupt bureaucracy, the merchants or business people who obtain privileges in exchange for their loyalty, and the military which enjoys a high status. The members of the alliance naturally do not want to lose the source of their material and moral income. Third, to preserve the autocratic regime, the ruling elite has exploited Syria's problematic relations with its neighbors. In other words, security concerns constitute a

serious obstacle to democratic and economic reforms. Nevertheless, some relatively liberal economic measures have created new social forces within Syrian society. Undoubtedly, these forces will be more assertive and politically demanding than traditional social bases of the Ba'th Party.

The fundamental external challenge to Syria is the Middle East peace process, in which Syria is confused about what to do. The fourth chapter's primary objective is to discuss the Syrian future stand in the Peace Process.

Syria officially seems ready to sign a comprehensive peace with Israel based on Israel's withdrawal from Arab territory occupied in 1967. But how realistic is this assumption? First, the Israeli right is in power, and seems to defy any solution demanding unilateral concession from Israel. Second, the Syrian position in the Peace Process is closely connected to, and under the threat of, its fragile internal stability. As in the internal question, Asad's own personality is indispensable to the Peace Process. He has been depicted as the only man "brave" enough to sign a peace treaty with the eternal enemy of Syria. This hastily reached premise is a misleading one. The findings of this research suggest that Syria is not ready to sign such a treaty. Even if Syria signs a peace agreement to recover its territory, the Syrian regime's commitment to a "full peace" with Israel is open to doubt, because of domestic and inter-Arab political concerns. At least, a full peace in the Middle East takes time because the long-standing hostility can not be forgotten overnight.

Hafiz al-Asad used to play power politics during the Cold War. As a realist, however, he knows the limits of Syria's power very well. The main argument of this study is that Asad, as long as he remains in the office, prefers a gradual transformation in

Syria's internal political and economic structure provided that it does not jeopardize his rule and internal stability. However, such an extended process takes a lot of time, and perhaps outlives Asad himself. Moreover, Syria's failing economy needs immediate action from the government. Nevertheless, a fundamental economic and political transformation of Syria under Asad seems unlikely in the near term because of the regime's insecurity about such a transformation.

His behavior in the Peace Process largely depends on two conditions: the terms of the peace, and the settlement of the internal question. Given the fact that the Israelis never accept to make a unilateral concession, and the Syrian regime is vulnerable to peace, Asad's realism leads him to prolong the "no peace-no war" period for some time.

As a consequence, the application of the "strategic and political culture" to new challenges is expected to draw a picture of Syria in coming years.

II. THE POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CULTURE OF SYRIA UNDER ASAD

There is no doubt that Syria is one of the key players in Middle East politics. Indeed, following the Treaty of Camp David in 1979, the Arab-Israeli conflict is now, to a significant degree, a Syrian-Israeli conflict. Syria under Hafiz al-Asad has become a champion of Arab nationalism, in a sense the voice of the Arab world in this struggle. Therefore, the deadlock in the peace process can not be opened unless Syria moves toward a permanent peace in the Middle East.

The objective of this chapter is to examine the roots and essential features of Syria's political and strategic culture, by means of a descriptive, longitudinal analysis primarily covering Asad's tenure.

There is a common argument to interpret strategic behaviors of the Arabs. According to this view, a common Arab political identity and loyalty to this concept provide a better conceptual link and deeper understanding of strategic behavior than do material derivations.¹ In other words, all Arab countries harbor similar strategic tendencies under the same conditions. Contrary to this assumption, however, Syria sets a distinct and different example in the Arab world. Its President Hafiz al-Asad appears to be a Machiavellian realist rather than a traditional, ideologically oriented Arab leader. Despite his well-known rhetoric toward the Arab cause, he has not been very much bound by this identity.

As a realist steeped in the balance-of-power approach to international relations, Asad recognizes the uses and limits of ideology. He is driven not by ideological considerations but by *raison d'état*.²

¹ See Michael N. Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security, Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp.400-432.

² Hisham Melhem, "Syria Between Two Transitions," *Middle East Report*, Spring 1997, p.4.

Asad's strategic orientation indeed bears both realist and idealist colors together. But his employment of ideology has been only a tactical deception to embrace his statue in the Arab world and to conceal his real ambitions.

Asad's style contrasts sharply with that of Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt, whose foreign policies had drastic consequences for their countries and their regimes. Surely, Asad is no Saddam, whose flair for brinkmanship and gross miscalculation has entailed the near destruction and collapse of his country and the emasculation of his power. Nor, is he Sadat whose bombastic, hyperbolic, electric-shock diplomacy led to Egypt's retrenchment and isolation in the region, and ultimately to his assassination in October 1991, almost a decade after he had assumed office.³

This chapter addresses two question: "Is there a national way of thinking, a strategic culture, for the Syrian elite?" and "Which factors play important roles in forming this culture?" In the end, the findings of this study may help one predict Syria's possible strategic responses to different challenges.

A. THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGIC CULTURE

The concept of strategic culture has been used to explain possible differences in strategic behavior or operational choice of different nations. Jack Snyder was the first to use the term "strategic culture" in an attempt to explain different Soviet and American attitudes toward nuclear war. He mentions "a distinctively Soviet mode of strategic thinking" which provides the decision-makers with a perceptual, semi-permanent lens through which they see things in traditional way. He calls this national way of thinking as "culture" rather than mere policy.⁴

³ Mahmud A. Faksh, "Asad's Westward Turn: Implications For Syria," *Middle East Policy*, Volume II, 1993, p.53.

⁴ Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operation* (Santa Monica: RAND R-2154-AF, September 1977).

Since the late 1970s, the examination and validation of the concept has become a demanding task for students of national security and international relations. Being concerned primarily with the Soviet union, Kenneth Booth identified "the cultural heredity" as "the set of patterns which present observable and sharp discontinuities among groups of peoples, and which focus the attention of national leaders towards certain options and away from others." This can affect the way in which war is viewed, and thus the perceived utility of the use of force and the relative importance associated with the concept of deterrence and defense.⁵ This approach was further developed into a clear-cut definition. He defined strategic culture or national style as "the habits of thought and action... of particular national military establishment," or "the set of attitudes and beliefs held within a military establishment concerning the political objective of war and the most effective strategy and operational method of achieving it." He argues that strategic culture can explain a good deal about the ways nations and armies behave in war, and even why they win or lose.⁶

Snyder later explained that he did not refer to the idea of 'culture' in the conventional sense when he first used the term "strategic culture," and he dropped the concept. He argued that "[D]ifferences in strategic behavior across states might be explained solely in terms of objective differences in the structure of their domestic and external circumstances, without regard for subjective cultural differences, and culture could be an explanation of last resort."⁷

⁵ Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), pp.64-83.

⁶ Yitzak Klein, "A Theory of Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol.10, No.2, January-March 1991, pp.4-5.

⁷ Jack Snyder, "The Concept of Strategic Culture: Caveat Emptor," in G. Jacobsen, ed., *Strategic Power: USA/USSR* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp.3-9.

Booth rejects Snyder's assault on the concept of strategic culture by pointing out his heavily nuclear orientation and his misuse of the word "culture." "To ignore strategic culture," Booth says, "is to risk black-boxing another government or nation in an extreme fashion, and so open one's theories and policies to all the dangers that might flow from misperception."⁸

More recently, a younger generation of scholars has elaborated and employed the concept of strategic culture differently. Among them, Alastair Iain Johnston talks about symbol, myths, and beliefs of national leaders that affect their perception of strategic options. Johnston says that strategic culture, if it exists, is a nebulous ideational milieu which limits behavioral choices, and it can play a role in establishing long lasting preferences in interstate political affairs.⁹ In other words, the strategic behaviors of nations may differ because the subjective ideas of the strategic elites differ. These different ideas cause them to perceive the same facts of international politics differently; and consequently to adopt different strategies. However, he explicitly criticizes both the proponents and opponents of "strategic culture," and attempts to reconceptualize it. He admits that there are not only ideational or cultural but also objective-realist- or variable effects on strategic behavior. The problem remains of relating strategic culture to behavioral choices. How strategic culture affects the specific choice is an extremely complex problem. To explain this, he argues that strategic culture, a system of symbols, comprises two parts: the first consists of basic assumptions about the orderliness of the

⁸ Ken Booth, "The Concept of Strategic Culture Affirmed," in Carl G. Jacobsen, ed., *Strategic Power: USA/USSR* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp.121-128.

⁹ Alastair I. Johnston, *An Inquiry into Strategic Culture: Chinese Strategic Thought* (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Michigan, 1993), pp.1-22, 45.

strategic environment; that is, about the role of war in human affairs, about the nature of adversary and the threat it poses, and about the efficacy of the use of force. Together these comprise the central paradigm of a strategic culture. The second part consists of assumptions at a more operational level about what strategic options are the most efficacious for dealing with the threat environment. Rather than claiming that nations from different cultures have completely different menus of strategic options, he argues that different societies may put different weights on the same options. That is, they rank them differently, or each individual nation has its own priority order for available strategic options. Johnston concludes by saying:

Done well, the careful analysis of strategic culture could help policy makers establish more accurate and empathetic understanding of how different actors perceive the game being played, reducing uncertainty and other information problems in strategic choice. Done badly, the analysis of strategic culture could reinforce stereotypes about strategic predisposition of other states and close off policy alternatives deemed inappropriate for dealing with local strategic cultures.¹⁰

Johnston's concept of strategic culture will be employed in this study because Syria's two-track policy, at first glance, fits his two types of strategic culture: *idealpolitik* and *realpolitik*. Additionally, the concept of strategic culture makes sense only when it is applied to, and mixed with, real structural conditions.

As for "political culture," it is the concept on which "strategic culture" is based and constructed. The concept of political culture was advanced by Lucian Pye and Sidney Verba. Pye defines it as "the dynamic vessel that holds and vitalizes the collective

¹⁰ Alastair I. Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture," *International Security* Vol.19, No.4, Spring 1995.

memories of a people by giving emotional life to traditions.”¹¹ In other words, “[P]olitical culture, that is, attitudes, values, ideas, feelings, information and skills, constitutes a framework within which people engage in political behavior.”¹²

As noted from their definitions, there is a strong correlation between the two concepts. The concept of political culture has an immense impact on the formation of strategic culture. The fundamental difference between them is, while political culture as a pure political concept is applicable to every nation, group and individual, strategic culture is a political and military terms mostly applicable to the top echelon of a given decision-making mechanism. Both of them will be used throughout this study.

B. SYRIA’S ARAB IDENTITY: PERSONALITY, MYTHS, AND SYMBOLS

A Western historian wrote “[A]ll those are Arabs for whom the central fact of history is the mission of Muhammad and the memory of the Arab Empire and who in addition cherish the Arabic tongue and its cultural heritage as their common possession.”¹³ Given the fact that there are Arabs who are not Muslim, the following definition sounds like a much more useful one: “An Arab is anyone who speaks Arabic as his own language and consequently feels as an Arab.”¹⁴

The Arabs generally think that the division of the Arab land, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf, into numerous separate countries is a temporary condition that sooner or later will be over. They view all Arabs as members of a single nation.

¹¹ Lucian W. Pye, “Introduction: Political Culture and Political Development,” in Lucian W. Pye and Sidney Verba, eds., *Political Culture and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp.8-11.

¹² Gabriel Almond & G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics Today* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), p.37.

¹³ H.A.R. Gibb, *The Arabs* (Oxford, 1940), p.3.

¹⁴ Jabra I. Jabra, “Arab Language and Culture,” in Michael Adams, ed., *The Middle East: A Handbook* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p.174.

The Arabs, who are thought to descend from Abraham's son Ishmael, have a lot of national characteristics. One of them is exaggerated self-praise. They are proud of their pre-Islamic Bedouin and medieval Islamic past. They claim that they are the greatest nation, or a chosen people, of the world.

The old Arab tradition which considered exaggerated self-praise and boasting an acceptable and even commendable method of enhancing one's honor can be regarded as the basis of a similar feature characterizing Arab behavior at the present time...An Arab orator addresses his audience as a noble and proud people and tries to evoke a positive or even enthusiastic response from it by praising it as part of the great nation in exaggerated and repetitious terms, referring to its heroism, manliness, steadfastness, and the like.¹⁵

Rhetoricism is one of the important features of the Arab personality. The power of Arab rhetoricism plays a significant role in Arab political and strategic culture. This power comes partly from the literal strength of the Arabic language. Raphael Patai, well-known for his writings about the Arabs, says: "Being conversant with several languages, I can attest from my own personal experience that no language I know comes even near to Arabic in its power of rhetoricism, in its ability to penetrate beneath and beyond intellectual comprehension directly to the emotions and make its impact upon them."¹⁶ The Arabs have such an admiration for literary expression that they are so influenced by words. Therefore one can rightly conclude that Arabic exercises great influence on the Arab mind. "It is a characteristic of the Arab mind to be swayed more by words than ideas, and more by ideas than by facts."¹⁷ The Arabs love poetry and rhetoric especially about heroic gestures. This strongly emotional expression and perception sometimes

¹⁵ Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), p.213.

¹⁶ Patai, p.48.

¹⁷ Edward Atiyah, *The Arabs* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955), p.96.

prevent them from focusing on the relationship between cause and consequence. Arabic language, in a sense, is "the flawed mirror in which the Arabs see the world."¹⁸ Thus an ordinary Arab tends to exaggerate in both love and hate, joy and sorrow. He is emotional rather than rational. This characteristic is sometimes reflected even in Arab politics. While Musa Alami, a prominent Palestinian Arab leader, was making a tour of the Arab capitals right before the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, in Damascus, the President of Syria told him:

I am happy to tell you that our Army and its equipment are of highest order and will be able to deal with a few Jews. And I can tell you in confidence that we even have an atomic bomb...Yes, it was made locally; we fortunately found a very clever fellow, a tinsmith....¹⁹

By using rhetoricism and exaggeration, Arab leaders and the ruling elites can easily manipulate the public toward the direction they want. That is, the decision-making mechanism in an Arab country is considerably free from public pressure.

Conflict proneness is another feature of the Arab personality. This can be explained partly with the severity in child-rearing practices, and the myth of Arab dual descent and the dichotomy correlated to it. According to traditional Arab literature, the Arabs have two ancestors, Qahtan for the South Arabian tribes, and Adnan for the North Arabian tribes. Qahtan who was five generations removed from Noah is nobler than Adnan who was twelve generations removed from Noah. Therefore Southern tribes are considered the true aboriginal Arab stock, while northern tribes are considered merely

¹⁸ Albert Hourani, "Arabic Culture: Its Background and Today's Crises, Perspective of The Arab World," *Atlantic Monthly Supplement*, October 1956, pp.125-127.

¹⁹ As quoted in Patai, p.52.

Arabized peoples.²⁰ Since then, there has been a continuous factional struggle within each Arab community. This traditional antagonism has been easily channeled into the political arena.

Famous Arab sayings, "an eye for an eye" and "blood demands blood," show that the blood feud is a major component of Arab culture. The blood feud is a part and consequence of group cohesion, and the most explicit manifestation of a general Arab propensity for fighting and conflict. Revenge is the only way of saving the honor. The concept of revenge, however, has a distinct meaning in Arabic culture. The Arab custom of trying to intimidate an adversary by verbal threats is a well-known feature of the Arab personality. Verbal threats are rarely translated into action. Especially intertribal or inter-Arab fighting in the past took the form of raiding in which armed clashes were avoided as far as possible. Fighting non-Muslims, the concept of holy war, changed the battle radically. It is a matter of killing and being killed.

Known to most of the Middle Eastern peoples, the famous Arab proverb, "I and my brothers against my cousin; I and my cousins against the stranger," points out two phenomena of Arab culture: continuous internal conflict and unification against outsiders. The latter, however, has proved to be a real myth.

In the Arab tradition, mediation in tribal conflicts has been a very effective means to settle or moderate hostility. This tradition has been adopted by contemporary Arab leaders. In this respect, it can be concluded that Arab culture is compatible with diplomatic means in conflict resolution, and they have the ability to adapt to various situations. But it should be noted that "[T]his ready adaptability has two facets: one is a

²⁰ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. I, p.544.

genuine flexibility and aptitude for digesting and assimilating the new; the other, a readiness to express superficial agreement and fleeting amiability which is meant to conceal the situation and hide the true feelings.”²¹

The mission of the mediator in the Arab world has been assigned to special persons such as descendants of the Prophet, nobles, sheiks, and chiefs etc. That is, the Arabs need a “big brother” in international conflict resolution. Arab leaders also suffer from a tendency to resort to an inter-Arab conference to solve each crisis in which Arabs are involved. Unfortunately, this process takes time and generally ends without reaching any reasonable agreement among the Arabs themselves.

The Arab world can be divided into two groups: oil-rich monarchies and poor one-party states, none of them democratic in Western sense. In this climate of oriental despotism, the demonstration of power is a vital instrument for sovereigns to remain in power. Building up mass armies and huge arsenals without regard to their effectiveness is a reality in the Arab world since appearance collects more credit in this culture than essence.

In Bedouin culture a raid must be conducted according to strict rules. For example, for a noble tribe, to attack an inferior or weaker tribe would be a shameful attitude. This cultural tendency suggests that deception was not a well-respected way of conducting war. Therefore the Egyptian offensive to Sinai in 1973 surprised not only Israelis but also outside observers because few people could have expected the Arabs to do such a thing.

²¹ Quoted from Dr. Hamit Ammar, Egyptian Sociologist, See Patai, p.107.

The Arabs are a patriarchal society which is kin-based. In all Arab countries key political and military posts are filled by the relatives of the rulers, regardless of their proficiency. This familism or kinship culture usually weakens the administration including security apparatus.

Aversion to manual labor is a general tendency among the Arabs, perhaps resulting from hot climate. The low training level of the military can be attributed, among other things, to this tendency.

Islamic components of Arab identity are of vital importance in understanding Arab way of thinking. The Arabs often equate Arabism with Islam. The Prophet of Islam was an Arab and the language of Koran is Arabic. In other words, Arabic is, in Arab thought, the Language of Allah, God. In fact, Arab national consciousness emerged after the foundation of Islam. Islamization of Arabia during Prophet's lifetime was followed by the large-scale Arab expansion outside the Arabian Peninsula and the Syrian Desert. "From 613 to 632, Muhammad and his propagandists increasingly appealed to national feeling to rally the Arabs to the new doctrine, which was universally valid but preached in a specific form intended especially for them."²² Actually, the Arabs owe their nationhood to Islam. There is no pre-Islamic Arab history, but a bunch of desert tribes in a continuous struggle against each other.

The Arabs thought that they were a "chosen people" to spread the Word of Allah across the world, and to impose the faith on unbelievers, by force if necessary. By spiritual motivation of the doctrine, "Din Muhammad bi'l-sayf" (The Religion of Muhammad with the Sword- a counterpart of medieval Crusader doctrine), Islam and to

²² Maxime Rodinson, *The Arabs*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.17.

some extend Arabism spreaded from Atlantic to the Far East as early as one century after the Prophet. Islam, in short, greatly changed the Arab concept of battle.

The Islamic doctrine divides the world into two parts: Dar al-Islam, House of Islam, and Dar al-Harb, House of War. This division has a political connotation for the Arabs: peace in the Islamic World and war outside it. Although this division is meaningless today, Islamic fundamentalists still look at the world from this perspective.

An orthodox Muslim recognizes a duty of loyalty to the state, as long as the state is the legitimate organization of the community. Otherwise the regime constitutes a form of oppression that could legitimate rebellion.²³ However, the problem is how to determine the criteria for legitimacy. According to an orthodox Muslim, this depends on the interpretation of the clergy. Therefore, the clergy tends to use this privilege to have a say in politics, moreover to manipulate the governments. Even in the most secular Arab countries, there is a channel of communication between the clergy and the politicians.

Another important feature of the Arab mind indeed results from an incorrect interpretation of Islam. In Islamic tradition, what God called good in Koran is good, and what God called evil is evil. The Arabs translate it into life by seeing everything only black or white; wrong or true.

Semites had no half tones in their register of vision. They are a people of primary colors, or rather of black and white, who saw the world always in contour...Their thoughts were at ease only in extremes. They inhabited superlatives by choice.²⁴

²³ Rodinson, p.155.

²⁴ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940), p.36.

It must be very hard to convince an Arab representative in a negotiation meeting. In fact, the Arabs have generally demonstrated a tough and inflexible standing in the Middle East negotiations.

Strong belief in predestination grants the Arabs superb patience, resignation and endurance in the case of failure and sorrow. This is good in terms of patience, and also has two side effects. First, this belief assumes that human being is incapable of changing things, and then suggests that it should be given up at a certain point. Second, an average Muslim generally does not speak of his intentions for the future without adding "if it be the will of God." Given the fact that in Arabic language time can not have the same definite and sequential connotation as in other languages, strong belief in predestination can affect the time dimension of strategic thinking, especially in timing of future events.

Having mentioned sufficiently about the slow-to-change cultural components of its Arab identity, we can move to more realistic and structural components of Syrian strategic culture.

C. SYRIA AS A DISTINCT POLITICAL ENTITY

Although the Arabs, more or less, have a common culture, there have always been differences in national character between one Arab country and another. Ka'b al-Ahbar, one of the companions of the Prophet, is reported to have said:

When Allah created all things, He gave them a companion. 'I'm going to Syria' said Reason; 'I will go with you' said Rebellion. Abundance said 'I'm going to Egypt'; 'I shall accompany you' said Resignation. 'I'm going to the Desert' said Poverty; 'I shall go with you' said Health.²⁵

²⁵ Quoted from Maqrizi, See Patai, p.23.

There are two myths that are deeply rooted and still alive in Syrian political culture: "Greater Syria" and "Ba'th Ideology." Greater Syria, the name of Syrian nationalism, is a theory which profoundly influenced the founders of the Ba'th Party. This theory was advanced by Antun Sa'adeh, a Lebanese Christian Arab who grew up in Brazil. He founded the Syrian Nationalist Party to promote the idea of Greater Syria. Obviously he preached "social nationalism," and had connections to the German Nazis.

He [then] postulated a historic Syria which had dictated the condition of those who lived in it, such as the Canaanites, Akkadians and Mittani long ago. Syria had two forms, an initial one which comprised the Levant and a later one which extended from Cyprus, which it includes, as far as the Iranian frontier.²⁶

In other words, the theory of Greater Syria, the Middle Eastern version of *Gross Deutschland*, advocates the unification of the former Ottoman province of Syria with Iraq and Cyprus.²⁷ This theory, of course, is not based upon historical and anthropological realities. Although it lacks evidence and reality, Greater Syria is an extremely potent doctrine, and influences the thinking of the Syrians. Syrian official and popular opinions, for example, see Lebanon not as the backyard of Syria but as its living room. From the fact that this theory includes Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Cyprus and Turkey's Hatay province, it is the expression of Syrian irredentism threatening regional peace and stability. Since 1930s, commitment to this national goal has become a moral obligation for the Syrian politicians. The leaders of the Ba'th, although they opposed it in practice, have absorbed "Greater Syria" into their political literature as a national myth.

²⁶ David Roberts, *The Ba'th and The Creation of Modern Syria*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p.12.

²⁷ John F. Devlin, *The Ba'th Party, A History From Its Origin to 1966* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), p.3.

The Ba'th Party was founded on April 4, 1947, in Damascus by Michel Aflaq, an Orthodox Christian Arab, and Salah al-Din Bitar, a Sunni Muslim Arab. Both were Damascenes and educated at the Sorbonne in France. The slogan of the Party was "Freedom (independence), Unity (of the Arabs), and Socialism." After the achievement of independence from the French mandate, "freedom", to some extent, lost its priority, and "unity and socialism" became the pivotal principles of the party doctrine.

The Ba'th Party was founded as a universal Arab political party with branches in different Arab countries, and with the motto "One Arab nation with an eternal message." Although Arab nationalism is a romantic and mystical concept, it was the core of the Ba'th ideology. "Arabism is the center of the Ba'athist doctrine, and the core of its doctrine of unshakable faith in the creative genius of a nation with a glorious and noble past."²⁸

The Ba'thists believe that the Arab world is artificially divided and they refer to it as the "Arab people in the different parts of its homeland." They consider the Arab states to be merely "regions" of the Arab nation.²⁹ Stating that the Arabs form a nation, the Constitution of the Ba'th Party says: "This [Arab] nation has the natural right to live in a single state and to be free to determine and direct its own destiny." It describes the Arab Fatherland as "the part of the globe inhabited by the Arab nation which stretches from the Taurus Mountains, the Zagros Mountains, the Gulf of Basra, the Arabian Sea, the Ethiopian Mountains, the Sahara, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Mediterranean."

²⁸ Derek Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986, Politics and Society* (London and Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p.87.

²⁹ Robert W. Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria, 1947 to 1982, the Evolution of Ideology, Party, and State* (Princeton: Kingdon Press, 1982), p.9.

Two points here draw attention. First, the lands currently controlled by the Arabs include some areas long inhabited by non-Arabs, such as Northern Iraq, Bahr al Gazal, Upper Nile, and the Equatorial provinces of Sudan. Second, their definition of the Arab Homeland covers another three areas which are currently parts of non-Arab countries, and except for Iran's Khuzistan, exclusively inhabited by non-Arabs: Israel, Khuzistan province of Iran, and Hatay province, and even Cukurova region, of Turkey. This irredentism creates tension in regional relations. The Ba'thists' hostility toward specific countries was obviously expressed in the political communiqué issued after the founding conference of the Ba'th Party in 1947:

Higher Arab interests govern relations with the superpowers' bloc and support for the United Nations. Friendship is important with all states except Britain, France, Spain, Turkey, Iran, and the United States.

Syria assumes two opposite historical roles concerning Arab unity. On one hand, the birthplace of the idea of unity was Syria. The concept of Arab nationalism has been at the root of Syrian politics, and its torch has been carried by the Syrians more devotedly than by any other group of the Arabs. On the other hand, "regionalism" was also primarily a Syrian product.

The 1961 breakup of the United Arab Republic, the Egypt-Syria Federation founded in 1958 under Nasser's leadership, coupled with the failure of the Ba'thist governments of Baghdad and Damascus in forming a federal union in 1963, thoroughly undermined the Ba'th's ideology. Especially after the fall of the Ba'th government in Iraq in November 1963, and the eruption of bitter hostility between Nasser and the Ba'th, Arab unity ceased to be a practical goal. However, it still continues to exist, not in any practical political agenda, but in the rhetoric of all Arab leaders. It has become a kind of

symbol by which Arab politicians and regimes prove legitimate, increase their popular support, and distract the public from focusing on actual problems.

The second principle of the Ba'th ideology is socialism. In 1950 Michel Aflaq wrote: "...socialism in the Arab Ba'th is limited to economic organization that aims to reconsider the contribution of wealth in the Arab fatherland and to lay out economic bases which would guarantee equality, and economic justice among the citizens..."³⁰ Their socialism was undoubtedly different from communism. Their Arab Socialism was moderate and spiritual in comparison to radical and materialist Western socialism. For example, they allowed the rights of inheritance and small-scale non-exploitative ownership. In fact, the Ba'th had an anti communist rhetoric and socialism was of second importance compared with Arab Unity.³¹ The founders of the Party preached a kind of nationalist socialism, and they described the socialism as an element of Arab unity. Obviously they realized that as long as economic inequality exists among Arab states, it would be difficult to unite the Arabs under a single flag. Thus they thought that socialism by redistributing economic resources could facilitate the unification process. During the pre-independence period socialism also served as a component of anti-colonialism.

By January 1965, all of Syria's major industry was put under state control. Private land ownership was preserved and a moderate land reform was implemented. Socialism was also considered a progressive spirit to destroy the backward social structure, and transform it into a modern society. The first step to do this was to reconcile socialism with Islam. Aflaq tried to do this partly by a reversal: "instead of having Ba'thism

³⁰ Devlin, p.34.

³¹ Itamar Rabinovich, *Syria Under the Ba'th 1963-66, The Army-Party Symbiosis* (New York: Halsted Press, 1972), p.10.

conform to Islam, Islam must conform to Arabism.” He stressed that Islam was essentially an Arab movement, of which the prime importance was the renewal and fulfillment of Arabism.³² The Ba’thists labeled Islam as a dynamic and revolutionary religion which can serve their policy. In practice, however, this assumption proved to be a miscalculation because of bloody confrontations between Orthodox Muslims and the Ba’thist state. “The forced treatment of the place of Islam in Arab nationalism, together with the implicit secularist tendencies, has been suspiciously regarded by devout Sunni Muslims.”³³

The organization of the Ba’th Party was based on a small circle of recruits who were close relatives and associates of the leaders and other influential figures. Although it was not intended as a party of minorities, it attracted a large proportion of its members from minorities. Therefore the Ba’th Party of Syria had never appeared as a mass political party before it came to power by a military coup.

As we have seen, the Ba’th doctrine was evidently too idealistic to implement. It was to be transformed into a more comprehensive program in the hands of a new leadership.

D. HAFIZ AL-ASAD AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF BA’TH CULTURE

The Ba’th Party came to power by the military coup of 8 March 1963. Contrary to the presumption of the founders, however, it was not by “democratic means.” Although the Ba’th Party did not take the lead in overthrowing the existing government, and the participants were largely members of the Military Committee over which the Party had no

³² Olson, p.13, and Devlin, p.24.

³³ Rabinovich, p.11.

control, this coup has been known as "the Ba'th Revolution." The political history of Syria before Asad lies outside the scope of this study. However, the period between 1963 and 1970 played a significant role in the formation of Syrian ways of thinking, and brought Asad to the scene.

First, military intervention in politics, and politicized, internally oriented armed forces became well-known aspects of Syrian Ba'thism. Second, factionalism or sectarianism became the most prominent phenomenon in Syrian politics and in the military. Every influential figure had to find an ethnic or religious base of power for himself. Some minority groups, especially the Alawis (Nusayris)³⁴, were disproportionately overrepresented in the state apparatus, and they occupied the most important offices. Third, by means of the thirteenth and bloodiest coup of Syria in seventeen years, the radicals took over the government and party in 1966, and the founders of the Ba'th Party who were relatively moderate were expelled from the country. The Neo-Ba'th intensified the commitment to socialism, and the Soviet Union blessed the new Syrian regime by financing some of its modernization projects. The Islamic motives were removed from the ideology. Before the 1967 Arab-Israel War, an article insisting

³⁴ The Nusayri is the most extremist Shia sect who deifies Ali, the Prophet's blood cousin and son-in-law. Founded by Muhammad Ibn Nusayr in the ninth century, the Nusayri believes in the trinity of Ali (*mana-essence*), Muhammad (*ism-name*) and Salman al-Farisi (*bab-gate*). They do not want to be called as the Nusayris because the term "Nusayri" has been used by Sunni Arabs with a derogatory connotation. They want to be called as the Alawis. Western scholars and media comply with their will, and call them as the Alawis. We also use the term "Alawi" throughout the study, but with two reserves. First, they should not be mistaken for the Turkish Alevis, Iraqi Turcoman Shabak or Iranian Ahl-i Haqq since their belief systems are fundamentally different from Syrian Alawis'. Second, the Syrian Alawis, unlike those three, are a politically ambitious sect. For more information See Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites, The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam, The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

that God, Islam and all religion must be rejected appeared in the army magazine, *Jaysh al-Sha'b*.³⁵

As for external dynamics, first, Arab unity became a subject of nostalgia for the old-line Ba'thists. The Tripartite Agreement, a new attempt for the unification of Syria, Egypt and Iraq made in 1963, failed. The Ba'th of Iraq was ousted from the government, and Nasser broke with the Ba'thists completely. Since then, the Pan-Arab character of the Syrian Ba'th Party has been kept only as an instrument of legitimacy, and for interference in other Arab countries' internal affairs. Second, Neo-Bath leaders turned their attention to Zionism and Israel. Despite their effort to form a united Arab front against Israel, they experienced a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Israelis in 1967. In this war, Syria lost the Golan Heights, which were strategically important for its security. Third, the Ba'th regime made a terrible mistake by recklessly intervening in King Hussein's struggle against the Palestinian guerilla movement in his country in 1970. The intervention failed. Syrian forces dispatched to help the Palestinians suffered heavy losses, and the Palestinians were badly defeated by Jordan. What the Ba'th regime gained from this strategic mistake was a new Arab enemy in addition to Israel.

It was Asad who was to stop this disastrous trend of Syrian policy. Syria's regime has been synonymous with Asad since 1970 when he came to power. Whoever wants to understand Syrian political and strategic culture must be familiar with Asad's personality. Asad was born in 1930 at al-Qardaha as an Alawi of the Numailatiya section of the Matawirah tribe. He joined the Ba'th Party in 1947 when it was founded. He went to the Air Academy in 1952. He commanded a fighter squadron in Cairo, then the capital city of

³⁵ Roberts, p.90.

the UAR, from 1958 to 1961. Asad's active involvement in politics dates back to 1959 when a secret military committee was set up there to rectify the situation in Syria. This committee was led by three Alawi Ba'thist officers, Salah al-Jadid, Asad and Muhammad Umran, and a Druze officer, Hamad Ubayd. All of them were from minorities. These officers were recruited as the members of the National Revolutionary Command in 1963 when the Ba'th Party came to power. Then they overthrew the old Ba'th regime, and took over the government in 1966. After the 1966 coup Asad secured two posts, Minister of Defense and Commander of the Air Force, and he was promoted to the rank of general in 1968. He exploited the failures of the regime in the 1967 War and in Jordan to eliminate Jadid and his associates. Many people believe that it was Asad's intentional action that led Syria to defeat in Jordan. They claim that Asad withheld the air force, and that due to the lack of air support Syrian intervention in Jordan failed.³⁶ Although Jadid was more popular in political circles and with the public, Asad's power was rooted in the armed forces, and he controlled Damascus by military means. He arrested the opposition, and became Prime Minister first. In 1971 a national plebiscite elected him as President of Syria.

Asad's personal qualities and political skills largely account for the preservation of his position for nearly three decades.

His appearance, tall and grave, his conduct, calm and cool, and his dignified bearing all bespeak a strong personality, which is manifested, *inter alia*, in his determination, consistency and stubbornness. He possesses an air of authority and confidence, acquired during his military career. These qualities make him a natural leader; and with his traits of modesty and honesty, also make him a popular idol with whom ordinary people readily identify. In addition, Asad is a shrewd politician, with an instinctive cautiousness, patience and realism- which possibly stem from

³⁶ Roberts, p.93.

his peasant-minority background. He is a systematic, though slow, thinker and has a rare habit of listening to others and of learning from his own mistakes. These characteristics, together with his deep and intimate knowledge of the Syrian political scene and his keen interest in inter-Arab and global politics, have made Asad a politician and statesman of national, regional, and to some extent international standing.³⁷

Asad possesses an excellent sense of timing. He is patient enough to wait for the right moment to strike a fatal blow on his enemy. He first allows his adversaries to weaken themselves by their own problems, and plays them off one another. Then he moves against the weakened target, and intends to spend as few resources as possible to destroy it. President Carter describes Asad as a patient, reserved individual, who is pragmatic in pursuit of his goals and must constantly jockey to ensure that his and Syria's interests are not ignored by the much stronger forces at work in the Middle East.³⁸

He visibly pursues Syria's and his own interests single-mindedly. His secretive nature, coming from his Alawi background, his pragmatism and brutality in pursuit of his goals give him an offensive and ambitious appearance. However, his regional moves are possibly intended to provide Syria with internal and external security, that is, they may be defensive in nature. Asad is acutely aware that he is a member of a widely suspect religious minority, the Alawis, and also a member of a political minority, the Ba'th, whose status and appeal has steadily faded in Syria during the last decades. For three

³⁷ Moshe Ma'oz, "The Emergence of Modern Syria," in Moshe Ma'oz and Avner Yaniv, eds., *Syria Under Asad, Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p.26.

³⁸ Jimmy Carter, *The Blood of Abraham, Insights into the Middle East* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), p.84.

decades, indeed, he has tried to compensate through diplomatic and political maneuver for Syria's natural deficiencies of power, and by so doing, to mask its vulnerabilities.³⁹

Although he continues to give lip service to the Ba'th cause, he may not have strong ideological convictions. "Asad is the consummate Machiavellian animal who can turn seemingly adverse situations to his own advantage."⁴⁰

He is a political opportunist who plays factions off one another, all the while staying on top with the sword of repression in hand. In dealing with both adversaries and friends, he is very careful to strike an adversary without beating him to death and to help a friend without getting him entirely out of his difficulties- lest one day the roles be reversed.⁴¹

Hence the friendship and the hostility of Asad's Syria are not permanent. Asad can shift from one side to the other in accordance with his changing interests.

When Asad first took over the country, his first concern was to secure his rule and internal stability. Therefore he abandoned the effort to accelerate the radical revolution in Syria. Instead, he attempted to widen support for the regime, and to strengthen the armed forces, with Israel's forces as the standard of comparison.

Asad seized power with the support of the Alawis. In return for their support, he placed the Alawis in the most important posts of the government and military. Therefore, real power has always remained in their hands.

In order to establish a one-man rule and personalize his presidency, under the Constitution promulgated in 1973, Asad provided himself with extensive political and military powers as well as substantial legislative authority. For example, he nominates

³⁹ Martha N. Kessler, *Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1987), pp.73-77.

⁴⁰ Faksh, p.51.

⁴¹ See Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle For The Middle East*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 1988).

and dismisses vice presidents, the Prime Minister, ministers, and assistant ministers (article 85), declares war or calls for general mobilization (article 100), and he is the supreme leader of the armed forces (article 103). Additionally, he is the Secretary General of the Ba'th Party.

His movement was named "the Corrective Movement," which was intended to correct what were seen as deviations since 1963. In order to broaden his political base, in February 1971 he established a People's Council, with limited political power in practice. He also created a National Progressive Front with the intention of including more of the leftist groups: Nasserists, Socialists, and Communists. These moves gave Asad the opportunity to incorporate more of the elite into his regime. While relying on the immediate support of his Alawi relatives and colleagues, he also used the Party's socialist, secular and Pan-Syrian appeal which led some of the rural people to support the Ba'th Party.

Asad created an inner circle known as the *Jama'a* (the Group) whose tasks are to assist Asad in protecting the regime against its internal enemies and in reviewing Syria's serious domestic and foreign policies, from a level above the regular government machinery. All members of the *Jama'a* are absolutely loyal to Asad. Among them, some prominent Sunnis or minority members are found as well as the Alawis.

Hafiz al-Asad took effective measures to control the armed forces. He used the "two army" concept which is common in totalitarian regimes. Besides the regular army, he created a special military force, *Saraya al-Difa'* (Squadron of Defense), of some 20,000 men, an almost entirely Alawi Praetorian Guard. The command of this force was given to Asad's brother, Rif'at al-Asad. Many of the top officers and regular soldiers

come from the hometown of Asad. Asad also appoints a large number of senior officers. "The criterion for their selection...is that they are personal, Alawi communal, and Ba'th-partisan friends, relatives, or comrades."⁴² To avoid an image of his regime as being based on confessional-military support, or a junta of Alawi officers, he appointed generals from different sects but undoubtedly loyal to him to the influential military posts. However, their authority is short-circuited by second and third ranking Alawi officers.⁴³ The loyalty of the armed forces was secured by improved conditions of service, cost price articles by army cooperatives, duty-free imports, interest-free loans, generous salaries, free medical care, liberal travel allowances etc. But these measures created a special type officer, a merchant officer who is inclined to corruption.

Ultimately, with 12 percent of the population, the Alawis dominated the Party, the Army, the bureaucracy, and subsequently the regime itself. The power structure is largely in their hands. This situation caused Asad to be charged with sectarianism both by the internal opposition and the other Arab countries. On 25 March 1978, in retaliation for Asad's criticism of his visit to Israel, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat labeled the Syrian regime as "firstly Alawi, secondly Ba'thist and thirdly Syrian."⁴⁴ It should be noted that Sadat did not regard the Syrian regime even as "Arab." Internal opposition who criticizes Asad has been dealt with ruthlessly, through imprisonment, torture and even assassination.

⁴² Maoz, p.28.

⁴³ Nicholas van Dam, *The Struggle For Power in Syria, Sectarianism, Regionalism, and Tribalism in Politics 1961-78* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1979), p.84.

⁴⁴ van Dam, p.93.

In order to reconcile the conservative Sunni majority with secular Ba'thism, Asad used political and economic means, although not very successfully. He restored the original presidential oath, which is sworn in the name of "Allah" instead of "honor and faith." The Constitution was augmented with a clause stipulating that the President must be a Muslim. Upon Asad's appeal, Musa al-Sadr, a prominent Shi'a cleric in Lebanon, declared Alawis to be within the spectrum of the Shi'a, a proof of Assad's affiliation with Islam. Then he attended Friday sermons and other prayers.

Asad's economic policies sought to reconcile the predominantly Sunni urban middle classes by easing the somewhat strict socialist-state controls on business activities. He supported the state-run public sector, which employs half of the Syrian work force. As a means of mass mobilization, he strengthened popular organizations, like the General Federation of Trade Unions, the General Union of Peasants, and the General Union of Students. The Party has gained support from rural Sunnis, even from the pious. State support to peasants prevented the Muslim Brotherhood, *Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, from finding a power base in the villages. However, Sunni opposition to the sectarian regime continued in the urban centers, especially Hama and Aleppo. In February 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood initiated an armed rebellion in the city of Hama, and took control of the city after killing dozens of government and military officials. In reaction, elite military units under the command of Rif'at al Asad fiercely shelled the city, destroying a large part of it and killing an estimated 30,000 inhabitants indiscriminately.⁴⁵ Thus Asad consolidated the regime in the first decade of his tenure. He uses the Ba'th party and its

⁴⁵ Ma'oz, p.32.

ideology, namely Arab nationalism and socialism, to legitimize its regime, as well as to absorb the tension between sects. The Party provides him with a non-Alawi appearance.

Asad's Bonapartist system has used a combination of kin and sectarian solidarity, Leninist partisanship of the Ba'th, and bureaucratic command to concentrate power in a presidential monarchy.

He has surrounded himself with pliant or corrupt figures... and turned a blind eye to their enrichment through corrupt activities such as smuggling. This gives the elite a strong stake in defending the regime.⁴⁶

Without deep knowledge about this fragile mosaic of power and how this clientelist or corporatist system works, it seems to be hard to understand the Syrian national style of thinking.

Personal relations with the president not only stratify confessional intimacy; they also provide access to power independent of the religious identity. Therefore al Jama'a, the President's personal clique, is a patronage network, nestled atop a pyramid of similar networks, which extend deep into Syrian society. Within the group, President Asad acts as a patron, conferring power and wealth in exchange for service and obedience. Outside the group, Asad's retainers sponsor their own clienteles by the use or abuse of their official power. Rif'at al-Asad, for example, derives his power not only from the primarily Alawi military unit he commands but also from his clients among the overwhelmingly Sunni or Christian economic elite. He sponsors select businessmen, granting them exemptions from normal import-export restrictions, giving them the first chance to bid on state tenders, and protecting them from investigation by various regulative agencies. In

⁴⁶ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Asad's Syria and The New World Order," *Middle East Policy* Volume II, 1993, pp.1-14.

return, Rif'at receives various forms of personal support as well as a piece of action. Patronage establishes a relationship of political subordination by a more or less explicit act of exchange. Because everyone does not have equal access to patronage, however, many Syrians believe that Asad's regime is corrupt.⁴⁷

As we have seen, first the Ba'th Party was brought under the control of the regime. Then Asad developed supplementary techniques for controlling the elite who remained outside the Party. The last phase was to unite the Party and the rest of the community. That is, the patronage network served to create an elite coalition. Now one can say that the decision-making mechanism of Syria is controlled by this coalition under the supreme authority of the President.

While extending the regime's doctrine and strategies of development to the rural and petite bourgeoisie sectors that were underpinning his rule, Asad also took a series of measures to make his country a formidable player in the Middle East. In 1970, he launched a diplomatic campaign to soften tense relations with Arab countries and non-Arab neighbors. By so doing, Syria would concentrate its attention and energy on Israel. He constructed ties with Colonel Qaddafi of Libya who gave financial aid to Syria. He visited Sudan, Egypt and Libya, and restored Damascus-Amman relations. He normalized relations with Tunisia and Morocco, countries that were old enemies of Jadid's regime. Asad's efforts to form a new Arab Federation gave him an instrument to silence the Pan-Arab components of the Party.

⁴⁷ Summarized from Yahya M. Sadowski, "Ba'thist Ethics and The Spirit of State Capitalism, Patronage and The Party in Contemporary Syria," in P. Chelkowski and R. J. Prangner, eds., *Ideology and Power in the Middle East: Studies in Honor of George Lenczowski* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988), pp.160-184.

Most importantly he visited Moscow, and established close relations with the USSR. In fact, after Sadat had expelled Soviet advisers and technicians from Egypt in 1972, the Soviets needed a new foothold in the Middle East. So the Syrian-Soviet relationship was a "marriage of convenience." After that date, Syria became the major beneficiary of Soviet aid to the region. Syria's military buildup and economic development were based on the strategic partnership of the Soviet Union. Asad's government received increasing shipments of weapons from the Soviet Union in the 1970s. The Syrian policy of "strategic parity" with Israel amounted to military equality with Israel Defense Forces by means of Soviet aid.

With Soviet aid Syria built up its military strength to an unprecedented level. In this armament campaign the priority was given to anti-aircraft defense against Israel's highly sophisticated air force. As many as 8,000 Soviet combat troops were employed in Syrian 63 SAM batteries in 1970s.⁴⁸ The following table depicts Asad's military buildup.⁴⁹

TABLE 1. Asad's Military Buildup.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Manpower</u>	<u>Tanks</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>Defense Spending (\$ million)</u>	<u>Arms Imports (\$ million)</u>
1967	80,000	430	150	313	58
1991	404,000	4,350	650	3,330	1,800 (1990)

Following the Camp David Treaty, Syria emerged as the only major military opponent of Israel. This was a key factor that led Asad to try to expand Syria's forces to the point where they would have military parity with Israel. Although he had some success, Syria's parity with Israel has been numerical at best. During confrontations, the

⁴⁸ Roberts, p.124.

⁴⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *After the Storm, The Changing Military Balance in the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp.38, 256-285.

Israelis have proved that their force quality and ability to use high technology effectively are much more efficient than Syria's.⁵⁰ In search of offensive capability, Syria asked for new weapon systems from the USSR in the 1980s. The negative response of the Soviet Union led to deterioration in Syrian-Soviet relations, especially after 1987, when "Gorbachev flatly rejected Asad's request for strategic parity, and advised him to seek a diplomatic resolution of the conflict."⁵¹

Although the Syrian Armed Forces developed a formidable strength in the region, they have some weak points. First, the main limitation of Syria in expanding its military forces is its weak economy and limited sources of outside financing.⁵² Especially since the collapse of the USSR, Syria has lacked an external partner capable of giving it essential resources and technology transfers. After the Gulf War it received about US\$ 2.5 to 3.2 billion in aid from the coalition partners, and could import \$ 960 million worth of arms in 1990 alone, ranking tenth in new arms orders in the developing world, and eighth in deliveries.⁵³ China, North Korea, and the former communist countries of Eastern Europe are among the new arms suppliers of Syria.

Second, Syria's dependence on external suppliers makes its military power vulnerable to political winds of international relations, and limits its offensive capability and the time period of operation. The procurement of spare parts and critical ammunition can be a serious problem in the case of an armed conflict.

⁵⁰ See Shelley A. Stahl and Geoffrey Kemp, eds., *Arms Control and Weapons Proliferation in the Middle East and South Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), Part II.

⁵¹ Faksh, p.56.

⁵² See Patrick Clawson, *Unaffordable Ambitions: Syria's Military Build-Up and Economic Crises*, The Washington Institute Policy Papers No:17 (Washington D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1989).

⁵³ Figures available in *Working Papers* by Richard F. Grimmett of the Congressional Research Service.

Third, Syria lacks nuclear deterrence capability. Instead, it relies on biological and chemical weapons, which are regarded as "inhuman" and prohibited by international conventions.

Fourth, due to its naval weakness, Syria is vulnerable at sea and to amphibious operations. Additionally, Syrian military intelligence is highly compartmentalized, and also acts like an internal security force. Most importantly, Syria suffers primarily from the deficient quality of its military personnel.

Its high command still lacks flexibility and speed of reaction, and is highly politicized. Power is still overconcentrated in the hands of President Asad, officers loyal to him, members of his family, Alawi officers. Complex dual chains of command exist to prevent a coup attempt, and Asad exerts direct control over the Syrian Air Force defense companies, the special force (Saraya al-Difa), and Republican Guard.⁵⁴

In terms of civil-military relations, the Syrian Armed Forces are under "subjective civilian control." This form of civil-military relations generally minimizes military professionalism and denounces the professional autonomy of the armed forces.⁵⁵ The Syrian military is a part of the political system. The Cabinet includes ministers in uniform. The contestation of the military for financial and political prerogatives is very high. Some scholars associate civil-military relations with the mission of the military.

A state facing a traditional, external military challenge is likely to have stable civil military relations...The civilian leadership under such circumstances usually adopts objective control mechanism...In contrast, if a country faces significant internal threats, the institutions of civilian authority will most likely be weak and deeply divided, making it difficult for civilians to control the military.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Cordesman, pp.277-278.

⁵⁵ See Samuel H. Huntington, *The Soldier and The State, The Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957).

⁵⁶ M. C. Desh, "Threat Environments and Military Missions," in L. Diamond & M.F. Plattner, eds., *Civil-Military Relations and Democracy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.14.

On the other hand, some argue that the military's influence should be highest in a challenging international threat environment, and lowest in a relatively benign one.⁵⁷ It can be said that Syria's position is between these opposite arguments. It has a serious external threat, Israel, and also potential internal threats; a delicate factional balance preserved by anti-democratic means, and Islamic fundamentalism. Syria's situation refers to controversial civil-military relations: the political authority intervenes in the professional realm of the military; in return, the military has a loud voice in politics.

E. IMPLEMENTATIONS OF SYRIA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

Some important events that happened during Asad's rule gave him a rare opportunity to put his skills into practice, and to elaborate his political and strategic thinking. Looking into them one can observe the strong and weak points of the decision-making echelon of Syria.

1. The Arab-Israeli War of 1973

Asad's major goal in this war was to recover the Syrian territory, the Golan Heights, which were occupied by Israel in 1967. He did not hope for more than this. He first agreed with Egypt on simultaneous attacks on two Israeli fronts, Sinai and Golan. Jordan and Iraq were also integrated into the Arab Alliance, although they did not actively participate in the war.

When the offensives were launched on 6 October 1973 as planned, the Arab forces achieved surprise because neither the Israelis nor Western countries believed that

⁵⁷ Harold Laswell, "The Garrison State," *American Journal of Sociology* No: 46, January 1941, pp.455-468.

they were capable of keeping a major attack secret or of executing one effectively. For the first four days of the war the Arabs clearly had the upper hand. On both fronts they penetrated into Israeli defense lines, and inflicted considerable losses on the Israeli forces. Syria seized most of the Golan Heights. Then, it was Israel's turn. Their counter-attack was first directed against Syrian forces. They easily crossed the 1967 cease-fire line, and reached and intentionally stopped on a line just 35 kilometers from Damascus. The Israelis then concentrated on Sinai and defeated the Egyptians. Syria signed the Disengagement Agreement on 31 May 1974 by which it recovered only Qunaitra, the capital city of Golan and an insignificant gain in comparison to the heavy personnel and material losses. The Golan Heights remained under the Israeli control.

Using his political skill, however, Asad turned an obvious defeat to his favor. The war made him stronger inside the country than ever before. The military and civilian people of Syria felt that they fought better than before, and the myth of Israeli invincibility had been dented. Asad, even after the cease-fire, declared that Syria was ready to resume fighting unless Israel withdrew from Arab territory.

Asad isolated Egypt, which was seeking a bilateral peace agreement with Israel, from the Arab world, and branded Sadat as a traitor to the Arab cause. Thus, Syria emerged from the war as the leader of the Arab world.

Mobilizing the Arab oil producing states toward an oil embargo, Asad contributed to the invention of the "oil weapon" against the West. He formed a formal alliance called the "Rejection Front" with Iraq, Algeria, Libya, South Yemen, and the PLO. Learning lessons from the war, he started a massive military buildup, and increased his reliance on

the Soviet Union as a great power ally and the sponsor of Syria's "Strategic Parity with Israel" policy.⁵⁸

2. Syria and Lebanon Crisis

The Syrian intervention in Lebanon illustrates Asad's political and strategic maneuver capability.

A number of rationales can be put forward to account for Syria's intervention in Lebanon. First of all, the fundamental motive of Syrian policy was the belief in indivisibility of Syria and Lebanon. In the Syrian mindset Lebanon has been a part of "Greater Syria." Neither country has ever established an embassy in the other's capital. The official ideology justified, and even encouraged, the Syrian intervention. Second, Syria has great economic interests in Lebanon. The Mediterranean ports of Lebanon, especially Beirut, are commercial outlets for the Syrian economy. Lebanon is also a cultural and intellectual center of the Arabs. Third, the geographic position of Lebanon is very important for Syrian military and security interests. The Syrian military planners have always been concerned at the vulnerability of their right flank. Lebanon, unless under Syrian control, provides Israel with a potential ground for an offensive. Fourth, sectarian strife in Lebanon would have spillover effects on Syria's delicate internal balance and threaten the regime. Fifth, further chaos or division in Lebanon would give Israel a chance to intervene. Finally, Syria's supreme control over Lebanon would bring the PLO under the wings of Asad's regime.

During his first intervention in 1976, Asad, without regard to severe opposition and unrest in Syria and Arab capitals, supported Christian Maronites, who were also

⁵⁸ M. Graeme Bannerman, "Syrian Arab Republic," in David E. Long and Bernard Reich, eds., *The*

backed by Israel, against leftist Muslims and the PLO Alliance. Asad pursued three goals with this action: First, he wanted to preserve the status quo, Maronite domination, because the Maronite bourgeoisie had a special place in the Syrian economy. Additionally, if Lebanon collapsed, an independent Maronite state would be the natural ally of Israel. Second, a possible victory of the leftist and the PLO Alliance over the Maronites would be a disaster for Syria, because a radical Lebanon would appeal to Iraq, Syria's chief rival. Third, a strike on the PLO could reduce it to a size that would be manageable for Syria.

Quite interestingly, Syria did not confront Israel in this operation, and did not bother the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon. Some scholars argue that the operation was a mutually agreed Israeli-Syrian intervention sponsored by the U.S.⁵⁹

After stabilizing the conflict, the Syrians ceased to defend the Maronites, and tilted toward the Palestinian side. In the meantime, they encouraged and supported rebellious splinter groups against Yasir al-Arafat within the PLO.

The Israelis' invasion of Lebanon in 1982 contradicted the tacit Israeli-Syrian agreement not to fight in Lebanon. Because of Syria's unwillingness to stop the Palestinians, and its massive reinforcement into the Beqaa Valley, the Israelis attacked them, and knocked out Syrian SAMs. After that Syria took a different course in order to contain Israel in Lebanon.

During this period, two characteristics of Asad's political style became fully evident- his perseverance and his ruthlessness. The assassination of

Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p.216.

⁵⁹ Avner Yaniv, "Syria and Israel: The Politics of Escalation," in Ma'oz & Yaniv, eds., *Syria under Assad*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp.172-173.

Bashir Gemayel, then Lebanon's President, was but one of the measures initiated by Syria...in order to salvage its position.⁶⁰

These measures continued with the destruction of the U.S. Embassy, the U.S. Marine Headquarters and a French Headquarters by terrorist attacks.⁶¹

The formal break between Syria and Arafat happened right after Arafat had been forced to evacuate Beirut. This time, Syria's instruments in Lebanon were the Shi'a and the Druze. The isolation of Arafat and weakening his position in the PLO was a mistake of Syrian strategy because this event forced him to appeal to Jordan and to negotiate with Israelis for a separate peace, both at the expense of Syria. Syria lost its predominant position regarding the Palestinian issue, and its conflict with Israel was obviously reduced to a quarrel over the Golan Heights.

Because of Hizballah's military capabilities, with generous support from Iran and Syria's sympathy, Syria was able to distance itself from the hostilities while Israeli soldiers were drawn into combat with the resistance. Thus, Hizballah's constant damage amounted to such a significant degree that Israel began to realize the importance of coming to terms with Syria over the Golan Heights.⁶²

The Israeli operation "Peace for Galilee" could not achieve its political goal, a U.S.-brokered peace treaty with Lebanon. Syrian rejection made a separate peace between them impossible. The Israeli's "Grapes of Wrath" operation, a large-scale bombing campaign against Lebanon in 1996 in retaliation for Hizballah's rocket attacks on Israel,

⁶⁰ Itamar Rabinovich, "The Changing Prism: Syrian Policy in Lebanon as a Mirror, An Issue and Instrument," in Ma'oz & Yaniv, eds., p.186.

⁶¹ Roberts, p.122.

⁶² Judith Harik, "Syrian Foreign Policy and State/Resistance Dynamics in Lebanon," in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, No:20, pp.249-265.

opened the door to a French initiative that disturbed U.S. hegemony in the region, and was welcomed by Syria. The Document of National Accord signed by Lebanese deputies in Taif, Saudi Arabia, in 1989, and the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination between Lebanon and Syria in 1991 confirmed the special influence of Syria in Lebanon. In the 1992 parliamentary elections, Damascus' allies came to power, and dominated the political scene in Lebanon. Lebanon in practice became a satellite of Syria.

In short, despite its inability to confront its more powerful enemy directly, Syria has achieved major policy goals in Lebanon by manipulating Lebanon's internal dynamics against Israel from the sidelines. This is a striking example of strategic gains at a very little cost.

3. Syria's Stand in the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars: The Containment of Iraq

Syrian strategic policy toward inter-Arab relations has been based on a conditional sentence: Syria can play a leading role in the Arab world only if Iraq and Egypt are neutralized and kept out of the Middle Eastern power game. After Egypt's isolation from the Arab world in 1979 when she signed a peace treaty with Israel, Iraq remained the major rival for Syria. Having more extensive economic and military power, Iraq was a constant concern for the Syrian leadership. Iraq was also perceived as the ideological archenemy because it challenged the legitimacy of Syria's regime by providing safe haven to old-line Syrian Ba'thists, including Aflaq, who were expelled from Syria by Jadid's and Asad's governments.

Asad joined Khomeini of Iran in 1979 to form an alliance to contain Iraq. It became an odd alliance of a socialist and secular Arab country with a non-Arab Islamic theocracy against another supposedly socialist, secular Arab country.

The most important motive for Asad to join Iran was to weaken Iraq's standing against Syria. The incentives for Iran to keep the alliance were indeed far more powerful and urgent than were the incentives for Syria. This asymmetry enabled Asad to manipulate the alliance.

During the Iran-Iraq War, which broke out on 22 September 1980, Syria seriously supported Iran in military, economic, and political terms. It cut off the Iraqi-Syrian oil pipeline, which transferred oil from Northern Iraq to Syrian and Lebanese Mediterranean ports. However, Iraq retaliated by expanding the capacity of the Iraqi-Turkish pipeline, and starting the construction of new lines to the Red Sea using Jordanian and Saudi soil. The Syrian sanction, although it imposed economic burden on Saddam Hussein, made the Iraqi-Syrian pipeline obsolete. Syrian military aid to Iran, however, was substantial. Iraq had to keep a considerable amount of military forces on the Syrian border at the expense of the Iranian front. Syria also made its airfields available for Iranian aircraft. It supported Iraqi opposition movements and the insurgencies inside Iraq. In retaliation for Syria's moves Iraq too set up the 'National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria,' a coalition of different Syrian opposition groups. It backed the Sunni uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama which claimed 30,000 lives. One of the important gains of Syria from the Alliance with Iran was that the Shi'a Hizballah organization was brought to the service of Syria with the help of Iran. However, this also allowed the Iranians to penetrate into Lebanon more intensely than ever before.

Syria was generally successful in preventing the formation of a hostile Arab front against Iran. It established a pro-Iranian club including Algeria, Libya, South Yemen and the PLO, and neutralized the anti-Iranian tendencies of the Gulf Coordination Council. Syria also prevented public condemnation of its alliance with Iran by undermining the Arab Summits in Amman in 1980 and in Fez in 1981-82.

For its cooperation, Iran provided for the free delivery of 1,000,000 tons of oil to Syria, worth \$US 196,000,000 annually. Additionally, Syria's profit was around \$US 200,000,000 annually from discounted Iranian oil.⁶³

Consequently, Iraq, with Western support, finished the war in triumph. Saddam Hussein became stronger than ever before. In this respect, whether Asad's standing with Iran paid off well is ambiguous. Perhaps he lost more than he gained.

Fortunately, Saddam's strategic mistake, occupying Kuwait in August 1990, rendered Asad a second turn to strike a new blow on Iraq, again by using external powers. Syria's alliance strategy can be summarized as "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." This means that the first goal of Syria in identifying with the anti-Iraq coalition in the Gulf War was to contribute to the possible collapse of Saddam's regime. There were also other rationales for Syria to join the West. Syria obtained large amounts of Kuwaiti and Saudi financial aid. It also received tacit permission to consolidate its dominant position in Lebanon. Additionally, it hoped that Washington would remove its name from the list of countries supporting terrorism. Thus, it would be able to break out of the isolation caused by its extremism and ties to a collapsing Soviet Union. Asad also realized that war

⁶³ Yair Hirschfeld, "The Odd Couple: Ba'thist Syria and Khomeini's Iran," in Ma'oz & Avner, pp.105-122. Also see Amazia Baram, "Ideology and Power Politics in Syrian-Iraqi Relations 1968-1984," pp.125-139.

with Israel was no longer a viable option owing to the asymmetry of power, coupled with the recent weakness of the Soviet Union. Therefore, a new U.S.-sponsored Middle East peace process might be able to enable Syria to recover the Golan Heights without fighting.

Syria's strategic culture after the Cold War should be regarded as a transformation period. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria lost most of its strategic partners. Its economy in the early 1990s was almost on the brink of bankruptcy. At this hopeless moment, Asad shrewdly maneuvered to prevent Syria from becoming the next victim of the new era through joining the anti-Iraq coalition and the U.S.-sponsored peace process. With a partial economic opening, new social classes, and of course new political forces, have been emerging in Syria. Its radicalism and militancy have been softening. Moreover, the Arab-Israeli issue has been losing its priority in the new agenda, and, at first glance, a new "Syria first" era has been beginning. Undoubtedly, there must be many strategic motives behind Asad's pro-West stand. In a speech after the Gulf War, in April 1991, he said:

The course of events has proved repeatedly that our stand was the correct and healthy one, exactly like our stand on Lebanon and the Iran-Iraq War. We did what we could according to our national interests.⁶⁴

Therefore, the West and its Middle Eastern allies should not turn a blind eye toward Asad's Bismarckian diplomatic style, and they should closely watch his moves.

⁶⁴ Alan Cowell, Syrian Leader's New Gamble: Pursuing Power as Arab Champion, *The New York Times*, May 14, 1991, p.A10.

F. SUMMARY: SOME ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF THE POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CULTURE OF SYRIA UNDER ASAD

Hafiz al-Asad's management of Syria, from the moment when he came to power up to the present, can be reported as a satisfying success. Although the policy of national integration has been partial and superficial, he stabilized the internal situation, and created a state which had more political, economic and military capability than ever before. Asad's Syria can be regarded as a rational actor in the realms of foreign policy and national security. Some essential features of the political and strategic culture of Syria under Asad can be summarized as follows:

1. Asad himself is a classical realist who believes in the balance-of-power approach in international relations. He likes to play power politics. The Arab cause has remained only in the rhetoric of the Syrian leadership. Syrian nationalism and the political myth of "Greater Syria" have been major motives for Asad's Syria. Asad does not thoroughly discard Ba'th ideology, which is needed to legitimize his regime. However, he never allows ideological motives to direct the strategic moves of the state.

2. Syria's main concerns are internal stability, the safety of Asad's rule and the security of Syria against external threats.

3. Internal factional struggle and political rivalry are common aspects of Syrian society which are largely inherited from Arab culture and mixed communal structure. For the survival of the regime, Ba'th governments try to neutralize internal threats by various means: using every method of suppression, employing the patronage system, divide and rule, and corruption, and maintaining the Party as a institutional base of legitimacy, etc. Radical Islamic groups are the leading elements of the opposition front against Asad.

4. Syria's traditional enemy is Israel. The end of the Cold War made Anti-Zionism the only ideological ground on which Asad can base its regime. To contain Israel Syria used to employ the policy of "strategic parity with Israel." Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Syria has had difficulties in continuing this policy due to the lack of a powerful strategic partner. Its priority seems to be the recovery of the Golan Heights from Israel. Syria may sign a separate peace treaty provided that Israel returns to its pre-1967 borders without asking for major concessions from Syria, a precondition which seems impossible.

5. Syria's chief rivals in the Arab world are Egypt and Iraq. To neutralize them and keep them out of Arab politics are Syria's primary aims in inter-Arab relations.

6. Syria traditionally distances itself from Turkey because of Hatay's incorporation into Turkey in 1939; Turkey's demographic, economic and military power; and the dependence on Turkey's water. Being aware of Syria's limitations compared to its northern neighbor, Asad uses whatever means available, mostly terrorism, to prevent Turkey from becoming a dominant power in the Middle East.

7. Syria views Lebanon and Jordan as organic parts of Syria, and defies any challenge to its dominant position, especially in Lebanon.

8. Although Syria has employed a forceful and uncompromising strategy, its natural posture is indeed defensive. Asad probably wants to give an impression of strength because he does not like to play a defensive role. He knows the limits of Syria's power in terms of its economy, demography, military, and internal opposition. Additionally, Syria traditionally feels insecure because of the fact that its borders generally lack natural defense lines.

9. The principle that "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" generally accounts for Asad's behavior in the formation of an alliance. Even within an alliance Syria tends to follow an independent foreign policy. For example, it crushed the leftists in Lebanon and supported Iran against Iraq regardless of the Soviet pressure.

10. Although Syria has been officially in a state of war with Israel, it has generally avoided confronting Israeli troops directly. Given its military weakness and dependence on external arm suppliers, Syria has used an indirect engagement strategy against its external adversaries very skillfully. It tends to manipulate external resources against its enemies and rivals, and to exploit their internal problems. Manipulating Hizballah and the PLO against Israel; the Iraqi opposition, Iran and the West against Saddam Hussein; and PKK terrorists against Turkey are parts of this strategy.

11. The Syrian military's strategic mission is to resist Israel, to deter Turkey and Iraq, and to control Lebanon, Jordan and the PLO. Above all, saving the regime from internal opposition is a major task. The Syrian military is an internally oriented and politicized force. Its offensive capability is limited, but it has a formidable fire power and considerable defense capability. Armored mobility and anti-aircraft defense take priority in armament. Superiority in numbers rather than in combat effectiveness is a common phenomenon of arm races in the Middle East. A low training level, deficiencies in the decision-making mechanism of the high command, and naval weakness are other important features of the Syrian military.

12. Finally, the weakest point of Syrian political and strategic culture today is that it is not institutionalized. It merely depends on the personality of Asad. Nobody knows exactly what will happen to Syria when Asad and his cult disappear from the scene.

III. SYRIA'S INTERNAL PREDICAMENT: RESISTANCE TO LIBERALIZATION

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the international communist system as a whole Syria lost its major strategic partner and other minor financial and military suppliers. Its economy in the second half of 1980s was almost on the brink of bankruptcy. The country hardly survived the crises. Then President al-Asad, by joining anti-Iraq coalition and US-sponsored peace process, saved his country from becoming an early victim of the new world order.

His shrewd maneuver, however, proved to be an example of political opportunism. Few things have changed in Syria after his temporary pro-West stand. Syria is still continuing to be an anti-democratic and economically backward state.

This chapter makes an attempt to find an answer to the question: "Why has Syrian regime failed to launch an efficient liberalization campaign to save the future of the country?"

A. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF DEMOCRATIZATION

Democratization, without any doubt, is the most important phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century. Non-democratic regimes have been replaced by relatively more democratic regimes by peaceful or violent means. Since the collapse of the communist bloc, this process has accelerated because most of the non-democratic governments lost their ideological foundation and financial or military suppliers.

Several arguments have been introduced to explain democratization. These arguments can be classified under three groups.

The first school puts more emphasis on structural factors. The adherents of this school claim that democratization cannot be successful in a country which lacks essential structural elements conducive to democracy. In other words, a "democratic climate" is the major prerequisite for success. Most of the proponents of the structural school give the top priority to "economic development." Seymour M. Lipset, for example, determines the degree of economic development in terms of wealth, industrialization, urbanization and education.¹ By this measure, countries with high per capita, largely urban-based and well-educated people have an initial advantage to set up stabilized democratic regimes. This hypothesis is widely acknowledged in the sense that democracy calls for a large middle class and civic culture that can be created only by economic development.²

Some members of the same school ascribe democratization directly to the existence of a bourgeoisie. Their argument is based on the claim that democratization is a class-based social revolution which is to be both precipitated and led by the bourgeoisie. This preposition apparently suggests that democracy can only be built on a market-oriented economy.³ However, as we will see later in this study, the emergence of a bourgeoisie does not sometimes suffice for democratization.

Some scholars come up with an idea that in addition to economy-based structural conditions, religious and cultural factors play a prominent role in promoting democracy. Huntington finds a strong correlation between Western Christianity, emphasizing the

¹ Seymour M. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, 1959, p. 69, and also Lipset, *Political Man, The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960), Chapter II, pp. 45-60.

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 69.

³ See Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: The Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), Introduction.

dignity of the individual and separate spheres of church and state, and democracy, as did Max Weber before.⁴

Democratization as a social revolution, however, is a matter of negotiation, and compromise. An attempt to explain democratization through only structural elements makes it a monotone, unchangeable, and absolutely inevitable process. As a conclusion, the exclusion of interaction between related actors from the democratization process is the main shortcoming of the structural school.

The second school's argument, on the other hand, aims at eliminating structural and cultural biases of the first school. The proponents of this school believe that democratization is the outcome of a bargain. The actors of this bargain are political elites who behave strategically in accordance with their attitude toward the regime change. This approach seems to discard economically oriented actors and other socio-economic factors. The commencement of democratization and its success are the results of an internal struggle between hard-liner and soft-liner political elites. Furthermore, some supporters of this approach are not concerned about socio-economic requisites for democracy at all, and they claim that democracy can survive almost anywhere.⁵

This "interaction model" exaggerates the role of the political elite while overlooking the socio-economic factors which strongly influence the elite's position in the negotiation.

The third school, the political economy model, incorporates the two above-mentioned arguments to find a middle way to explain democratization. The political

⁴ Huntington, pp.72-85.

⁵ Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.1-94.

economy model acknowledges the fact that the fate of democratization ultimately depends on the strategic choices of the key actors, which are the supporters and opponents of the incumbent regime. However, socio-economic structural conditions substantially direct their actions.⁶

Some authoritarian states, such as Syria, are more distributive than extractive because they can survive only as long as they satisfy the interests of the key actors. Through the authoritarian bargain, the state and the actors come to an agreement on the distribution of the resources. With a decrease in milk, the death of the cow, and a cheat in the agreed distribution of milk totally undermine the authoritarian bargain. In this respect, an economic crisis can cause some players to defect from the game, and spoil the distribution. By causing social and economic unrest, a crisis creates split within the elite. The deeper the cleavage within the elite becomes, the more seriously it threatens the survivability of the authoritarian regime, and the bigger opportunity it provides for regime change.

Haggard and Kaufman count three factors which determine the regime's ability to survive an economic crises: regime type, the presence of an external rent, and elite cohesion. According to them, an authoritarian regime with a strong legitimizing ideology, easy access to foreign financial aid, and a cohesive elite is more likely survive an economic crises. The outcome of liberalization efforts, or regime change, clearly depends on whether the bargain will continue or collapse during the crises.⁷

⁶ Stephen Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.5.

⁷ Not only an economic crises but a military defeat outside or inside the country, a succession crises, or an internal strife can trigger a regime transformation as well because they can destroy the elite cohesion or legitimizing ideology of the political system.

From the perspective of "political economy," the resistance of the regime and the elite can explain Syrian failure in liberalization. The availability of external rent will not be taken into consideration because it is a less important external factor, and it has been in decline for recent years. "... Although international factors, direct or indirect, may condition and affect the course of transition, the major participants and the dominant influences in every case have been national."⁸

B. SYRIAN RELUCTANCE IN LIBERALIZATION

1. Resistance from the Regime: Leadership and Ideology

Ba'thism used to be the legitimizing ideology of Syrian regime, however, it is now at risk in many respects. The three principles of Ba'thism –freedom, unity, socialism-, although preserved in daily inter-Arab rhetoric, are at odds with the new world order, and Syrian environmental assumptions. First of all, by preaching freedom, the founders of the Ba'th Party intended to express the idea of "gaining independence from the French," and providing the citizens with a life free from any kind of suppression. Therefore, "freedom" already dropped from the political agenda. The unity of the Arabs was a stillborn idea which has been used to be a mobilizing motive, or a tool of inter-Arab rivalry. Given the failures of unification attempts and Syrian position in the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars, Asad never took the unification issue too seriously. His unity project in 1970-71 just served the consolidation of his rule. It provided him with financial support from oil-rich Arab countries, and ensured his good public relations. As for socialism, Ba'thist socialism to a significant degree has lost its credibility since the collapse of communism. As a result, one can say that Syria's regime faces an ideological

⁸ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1991), p.ix.

crisis. Because of this ideological bankruptcy, the party's role within the regime has been declining. The Ba'th Party, in order to survive, turned into a corrupt patronage mechanism which will be discussed later.

The Syrian regime has invented new means or concepts in order to fill the gap caused by ideological crises. First, the Arab unity was gradually replaced by a "Syria first" approach and "Greater Syria," in Antun Saadeh's Nazist form, became the backbone of Syria's ambitious foreign policy. Second, the "progressive" feature of socialism has been more emphasized than its out-of-date economic principles. Furthermore, the liberal components of Asad's so-called "corrective movement" era have been stressed frequently. "Asad argues that his 1970 rise to power initiated a Syrian perestroika-political relaxation and opening to private sector- long before Mihail Gorbachev..."⁹ Asad's myopic optimism partly results from the successfully weathering the economic crises of the late 1980s. Third, the secular Ba'thist tradition has been introduced by the government as a guarantor against Islamic fundamentalism. This argument is, and will remain, true as long as Syria lacks an efficiently organized, powerful secular opposition to the regime. Ba'thism, as it is introduced as the unique ideology to contain political Islam, has become more dependent on minorities, especially the Alawis who are relatively progressive component of the society, and main pillar of the regime. This situation causes more people from the Sunni majority to defect from the political power base of the regime. By so doing, the regime exacerbates the antagonism between ethnic minorities and religious sects of the country, and strengthens the political Islam. Asad thus has a good reason to fear political liberalization. Having taken several

⁹ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "State and Civil Society in Syria," *Middle East Journal*, Vol.47, No.2, Spring 1993, p.254.

lessons from Algeria, Jordan and Lebanon where the Islamists gained significant popular support through legal electoral means, Syrian leadership seems to be unwilling to stage a serious liberalization program.

Fundamentalist Islamic movements are generally concentrated in traditional urban quarters and the *suq*, small or middle size merchants, shopkeepers, artisan of the bazaar. The pious *suq*'s economic views are generally anti-statist. Thus, Islam becomes a tool for the urban interests to resist the regime's rural-based structure. Additionally, the *suq* is generally dominated by the Sunnis. Taken together, the containment of political Islam can be achieved, to some extent, at the expense of urban-based business class, which demands economic and political liberalization.¹⁰

Fourth, Ba'thism is presented as the fighting spirit against Zionism and Israeli domination of the region. The regime has to demonstrate its nationalist credentials, especially by opposing Israel. It can survive by mobilizing the people against a common external enemy. Many incidents have proved that although many Syrians do not approve the regime, they certainly support its policy of the "containment of Israel." Even Hama uprising in 1982, for example, was ascribed to Israel, Egypt, and the US, and it was viewed by the regime as a conspiracy of external and internal enemies' alliance.¹¹ In reality, "the justification for authoritarian rule ended during the 1991 Madrid Conference when the Syrian-Israeli question was transformed from an existential conflict to a border dispute."¹²

¹⁰ Hinnebusch, p.249.

¹¹ Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), p.35.

¹² Glenn E. Robinson, "Elite Cohesion, Regime Succession, and Political Instability in Syria," *Middle East Policy*, Vol.V, No.4, January 1998.

Now it is mandatory for the Syrian regime to create new adversaries, at least in official rhetoric. The Syrian Ambassador to Washington, at a press conference in May 1998, released a clue about this effort while he was declaring that the recovery of Hatay from Turkey is right after the Golan Heights in their agenda.¹³

Fifth, perhaps most importantly, the Syrian Ba'th regime seeks to substitute a cult of Asad's personality for its declining ideology.¹⁴ Having personalized the regime, Asad rules the country by decree like a "presidential monarch."¹⁵

He appears to make all key decisions himself, remaining aloof and isolated, seldom meeting with his cabinet ministers, and relying on the telephone as his preferred instrument of government... Because of his intimidating style, those around him are reluctant to offer advice or to take the initiative.¹⁶

Therefore, Asad's personal way of thinking is the most important component of the regime's attitude toward modernization. Asad's main concerns are the preservation of his rule by all means and the external, especially against Israel, security of the country. The major flaw of his statecraft is his ignorance of internal affairs. He prefers to devote himself to foreign affairs and military issues, and to play strategic games dangerously. He is preoccupied by the conflict with Israel, and sees everything including internal situation in this context. In his mind, the internal situation is a base for external action. Accordingly, he lacks a close interest in economic matters. "His closest associates have military or foreign affairs backgrounds, while his economic appointees lack stature within

¹³ *Yeni Yüzyıl* (Turkish daily), 7 May, 1998.

¹⁴ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Asad's Syria and New World Order," *Middle East Policy*, Volume II, 1993, No.1, p.13.

¹⁵ Term is borrowed from Malik Mufti.

¹⁶ Drysdale and Hinnebusch, p.24.

the elite and do not have easy access to him.”¹⁷ He explicitly fears that a radical economic liberalization, by re-enforcing Sunni business class’ position and Islamist groups’ base of power, means a blow to internal stability. Hence internal disorder caused by the split among the proponents of the regime can weakens Syria’s firm stand against Israel. From this perspective, Asad himself is the main obstacle on the road leading to a radical economic transformation. His make-up economic measures, which are perceived by some people as reforms, are actually part of a tactical policy designed to incorporate the business community into the system, and thus to keep the established order.

These policies, although slightly relieving the state control over the economy, offer very little impetus for political liberalization.

Speaking to parliament in March 1992 on the occasion of the start of his fourth term, Asad maintained that he saw no reason for democratic change in Syria in tandem with the outside world. Treating democracy as a luxury afforded only by wealthy states, he stated: “Only when Syrian per capita personal income equals that of its Western counterparts could we then talk about the implementation of democracy.”¹⁸

His remarks imply for that Syria is not going to become a real democracy in the foreseen future. Asad, however, must be intelligent enough to understand that Syria with 3.8 percent population growth rate, decreasing oil revenues, and a stagnant, backward economy can neither preserve internal stability nor keep up with Israel’s economic and military potential. Given Syria’s internal vulnerability to social unrest, Asad seems to prefer a gradual economic transformation without a corresponding political liberalization.¹⁹

¹⁷ Drysdale and Hinnebusch, p.44.

¹⁸ Mahmut A. Faksh, “Asad’s Westward Turn: Implications for Syria,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol.II, 1993, p.60.

¹⁹ Hisham Melhem, “Syria Between Two Transitions,” *Middle East Report*, Spring 1997, p.6.

There is another reason accounting for Asad's resistance to liberalization. A democratic country with market oriented economy must be open to international community and institutions. In such a climate, Asad knows, the clandestine crimes committed by his regime, like state sponsorship of terrorism, smuggling, drug trafficking, ruthless repression on the opposition, and other human right violations, will be made public, and it will raise harsh criticism and international pressure against Syria.

In sum, Syrian leadership itself and newly adopted justifications for authoritarian rule undermine, and even prevent the implementation of necessary economic and political liberalization in short term.

2. Elite Cohesion Against Liberalization: The Main Beneficiaries of the Regime

The Ba'th Party emerged as a reactionary political movement against foreign domination and the traditional elite, which was composed of landed aristocratic families, predominantly Sunni urban merchant class and state officials. Thus the party inevitably appealed to the upwardly mobile lower classes, especially landless peasantry. However, the Ba'th governments between 1963-1970 could not succeed in changing the party's elitist appearance which always lacked popular support. Hafiz al-Asad, unlike his predecessors, realized the weakness of the Ba'th Party, and made great efforts to transform it from a handful men's initiative to a popular mass movement. Popular organizations, such as General Federation of Trade Unions, The Farm Laborers' Union, the Youth Federation etc., enabled the party to become a linkage between the people and the government. Asad's thoughtful foundation of the National Progressive Front incorporated the loyal opposition into the regime. During 28-year tenure of Asad, the

regime has created privileged social strata which have benefited from the Ba'th rule more than some others have.

The peasantry is one of the main beneficiaries of the Ba'th regime. They benefited from land reform, government subsidies to the agricultural sector, and infrastructure projects which changed, although moderately, the daily rural life. Government policies such as free schooling, easy access to military career, scholarship for abroad education opened the door for upward mobility of peasants' children. Accordingly, large-scale agribusiness has flourished since the Law 10, a law intended to facilitate private investment and primarily to expatriate Syrian capital, was passed by the parliament in 1991. By the pro-peasantry policies, the Ba'th regime hit two birds with one stone: First, the majority of Sunni rural population was, more or less, drawn into the political system, and thus the government was able to prevent the radical Islam from penetrating into the countryside. Second, richer agriculturalists re-emerged as a product of relatively liberal measures, and became a reliable ally of the political elite. After all, it is clear the peasantry wants to preserve the status quo of the country, or at least it lacks a strong interest in further liberalization.

A large public sector, including industrial workers, managers and state bureaucracy, was created by the regime through nationalization and giving the top priority to industrialization. The public sector employs half of Syrian work force. It pays higher wages, and other fringe benefits, so getting a job in the public sector is still an attraction for an average Syrian. The government uses these posts as political gifts granted in exchange for loyalty and compliance. Despite well advertised liberal economic measures, the government still continues to control all strategic areas, including oil,

electricity, banking, chemicals, defense industry, and some other trivial industries such as textile, and food. Among the governing elite and public sector employees is there a common fear that mass privatization of state-owned businesses could produce social instability such as unemployment. The communists, socialists, and radical Ba'thists are backing the public sector in the struggle against liberalization.

The Law for the Encouragement of Investment (Law 10), passed by the People's Assembly in May 1991, was intended to stimulate foreign and domestic private investment by lifting restrictions on exchange transactions, permitting to import capital goods duty-free, and providing tax exemption for a fixed period of time. Upon these measures, public workers complained that the government's incentives were encouraging private investment at the expense of state-run enterprises. The Ba'th Party-affiliated popular organizations which are kept alive by public workers' contributions attacked the government and accused it of diminishing the demand for domestic products by allowing import of foreign goods. The government, realizing that greater state encouragement to private sector can alienate public sector managers from the regime constituencies, had to allocate additional financial resources to revitalize the public sector.

Additionally, "Syria's public sector managers persisted in lobbying to maintain the regime's link to the economies of the former Eastern bloc as a way of counterbalancing pressure from the Gulf states to promote an internal economic order dominated by private enterprise and market relations."²⁰ Their insistence on transferring backward technology to the country has worsened inefficient production capability of Syrian public sector.

²⁰ Fred H. Lawson, "Domestic Transformation and Foreign Steadfastness in Contemporary Syria," *Middle East Journal*, Vol.48, No.1, Winter 1994, p.57.

As a conclusion, it can be said that the public sector is against liberalization because of economic, political and psychological reasons.

The military and internal security apparatus became the regime's key components that enjoy a privileged status. Since the traditional elite was destroyed, the army officer has been the most significant political actor of Syria. The military dominated by the Ba'thists and Alawis is the most prominent and loyal supporter of Asad. "Of the seventeen clearly identifiable military members of the Central Committee in 1985, at least ten (i.e. almost 60 percent) were Alawis."²¹ The Asad regime certainly owes its unprecedented longevity primarily to loyal military and internal security organization.

Syria's defense spending during Asad's rule increased from \$384 million in 1970 to \$3,330 billion in 1991, and manpower from 93,000 to 404,000 in the same period.²² The military personnel were granted high fringe benefits above what other citizens or government employees have. Job benefits, such as army cooperatives, the right of duty-free import, high salary, good housing etc., combined with the opportunity to promote to the ruling elite, have attracted many ambitious young to the military.

Even today, notwithstanding substantial economic hardships, there is no indication that the Asad regime is willing to cut the resources allocated to the military. The success in Lebanon and during Hama uprising raised the credibility of the military. In return for this service, the regime has made new concessions to high-ranking military cadres. As a result of corruption, a new "merchant officer" type is emerging in the armed forces. "Much of the smuggling that goes on in Lebanon can be explained as a means by

²¹ Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria, Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), p.123.

²² Anthony H. Cordesman, *After the Storm, The Changing Military Balance in the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p.256.

which Damascus pays off (by turning a blind eye) some of the key military commanders who control smuggling routes in Lebanon.”²³

Under these circumstances, the military seems to retain its authoritarian bargain, and to resist further liberalization. Its position can be explained from different points: First, further liberalization can undermine its dominant place in the regime by contributing to internal and external peace. The military of a democratic and peaceful Syria would have fewer things to say in politics than it has today. Second, the corrupt commanders may lose the economic privileges granted by the government, especially in the case of the withdrawal from Lebanon. Third, a new regime installed by popular will may purge old military leaders from their posts to revenge for the past. Finally, a powerful and more assertive business class may sweep the military away from the political scene. Therefore, the military's resistance to reforms seems to be a rational act from their perspective.

Ethnic and religious minorities are perhaps the biggest winner of the Ba'th regime. Given the oppression they experienced before at the hands of the majority, Syrian minorities largely adhered to Ba'th ideology. This is logical because the Ba'th was explicitly secularist, and opposed sectarianism, tribalism, and regionalism. The Alawis, an extremist Islamic sect and a rural community mostly condemned by urban-based Orthodox Sunni Islam, found a safe haven in the Ba'th regime. Year by year they dominated the regime by means of their power in the party and military where they had been recruited in large numbers by the French during the mandate period. Thus the Ba'th increasingly came to be seen as a minority-based party, and became a victim of sectarianism it originally rejected. The Alawis are certainly overrepresented in the party,

²³ Robinson, p.172.

and the army. Syrian military, it is widely argued, was transformed into a Ba'thist and Alawi-dominated ideological armed forces. "Syrian authorities occasionally practiced strong favoritism toward Alawis in allocating foreign fellowships to students, or selecting new members for the Syrian diplomatic service."²⁴ Landless Alawi peasants from Lataika were given land in Hama and Homs.

Despite Asad's attempts to change the sectarian face of the regime by appointing more Sunnis to important posts, a predominantly Alawi central cadre is still controlling the key positions of the military, security, and intelligence. In other words, the sovereignty over the fate of the country belongs to the Alawi core of the regime.

In short, the Ba'th regime made the Alawis the most upwardly mobile group. They have become an educated, semi-urban-based, qualitatively improved and progressive community within the society. Therefore, the Alawis are afraid of that the end of the Ba'th regime is going to mean the end of the Alawi rise. Although the Alawis are not politically monolithic, and some liberal-minded Alawi intellectuals are critical of authoritarian rule, the Alawis en masse want to preserve the regime. They do not want the return of power to the Sunni dominated business class. They are concerned about a sectarian bloodbath and a reprisal for repressive past of the Ba'th Party. Due to the above-mentioned reasons, the Alawis are suspicious about the reforms. Ironically, fearing liberalization, the Alawis, once the most progressive element of the Ba'th revolution, have become the most conservative section of the society.

3. New Strategic Coalition: A Marriage of Convenience

As pointed out in the previous sections of the study, the traditional beneficiaries of the existing Syrian regime expectedly do not favor further liberalization. In strategic

²⁴ Van Dam, p.9.

sense, however, neither of them alone is capable of initiating or stopping a reform process. Above all, as a result of ideological decline of the Ba'th regime, each appears an individual power base rather than a part of a unified front bound by strong and common interests. Additionally, Asad plays off them one another to prevent a single and strong voice against the government.

Syria's contemporary strategic elite that will mold the future of the country has two components; the Alawi- dominated military and security apparatus in cooperation with some top Ba'thist civilians, and the emerging Sunni-dominated business class, or economic power. The survival of the authoritarian bargain is going to depend on the struggle and compromise between these two powers, namely politico-military power and economic power.

The new Syrian bourgeoisie includes three groups of people whose sources of wealth and political orientations differ from each other in some respects. The first group is the large-scale capitalists of Damascus, who have benefited from the relatively liberal economic policies of the government. The second group is composed of generally Aleppo-based small-scale manufacturers and traders who traditionally dislike the Ba'thist regime. Some members of this group were affiliated with Islamic movements before. The third group is composed of the sons of the ruling elite and corrupt officials who are skilled in translating the power of their office to money. The wealth of this group comes from the government bits, corruption, smuggling, official manipulation of exchange rates etc.

The Damascene merchants, who are ethnically and religiously mixed, most benefited from the regime's liberal trade policies, and they have collaborated with the

regime. There are several reasons behind this grand bourgeoisie's pro-regime stand. First, they need a stable country to build up a dependable domestic market. They do not want a radical economic change and a full-fledged democratization which can undermine the stability of the country and the market. Second, their collaboration with the corporatist state structure gives them an economically privileged position which they may lose in an open market economy. Third, they fear that a social disorder or internal conflict created by radical liberalization certainly strengthens the military and security apparatus that already have an upper hand in Syrian politics. Finally, the bourgeoisie is not powerful enough to manipulate government, to force it toward more liberalization.

The second and third groups together constitute the petite bourgeoisie of Syria that is more critical of the regime although the "sons" is an extension of politico-military elite in the economy. The Aleppine merchants, manufacturers and agriculturalists feel that the government discriminates against them. As for the sons of the elite, they are younger, more energetic, better educated and more assertive than the first two groups. Undoubtedly, they, as become more powerful, will demand more liberalization.

The Alawi officers and security chiefs who control the army and internal security agencies lack the capability of creating their own capitalist class. Therefore, they collaborate with the predominantly Sunni bourgeoisie by acting as a broker class between government and business world. This intermediary role pays off well. They seem happy with this odd alliance. They support the regime. Otherwise, further liberalization would strengthen the bourgeoisie, and deprive them of the resources they obtain with no cost.

C. SUMMARY

The Syrian regime survived the economic crises of the late 1980s because of its cohesive elite supported by a strong ideological justification and external rent made available by Iran, the Gulf States and the West. These factors provided the regime with extra strength for a quick recovery. Although the country went through a disastrous crises period, it seems that Syrian government did not learn a lesson from that bitter experience. It has failed to make structural arrangements for economic and political liberalization. Internal security concerns and an economic interests-based strategic alliance toward maintaining the established order are the main obstacles to system transformation. Additionally, there is little social pressure for democratization. The Ba'th corporatism has obstructed efficient alliances against the regime. Worse than this, the majority of the people fear for the political consequences of economic liberalization.

As long as Hafiz al-Asad continues to rule the country, and the new elite cohesion –military and business alliance- remains intact, talking about a radical change in Syria in short term is nothing but a delusion. Nobody knows how long Syria can resist the pressures for the regime transformation. The regime can probably survive until the next economic or succession crises, both undermining the elite cohesion. On the other hand, the external and internal pressure for liberalization over Syrian regime is more severe than ever. The socio-economic structure of the country has changed, and a middle class is emerging. The external rent has been in decline. The oil production, the main source of government revenue, is expected to drop to the level which can only meet the domestic consumption. The bourgeoisie is gaining power. The population is growing at one of the highest rates in the world. Syria's economy lacks the capability to compete with its

neighbors. The world community is becoming more sensitive to democracy and human rights.

In sum, Syrian stand against liberalization is fragile. The country is growing ripe for an inevitable regime transformation in the long run. What matters in this context is whether the transformation will be a smooth one or not.

IV. SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN CRISIS: PEACE OR SURVIVAL?

Syria surprised some of the observers when it joined the U.S.-brokered peace process in 1991. It was really surprising because Syria had long been the leading member of the "rejectionist front" which was refusing not only peace with Israel, but also the very existence of a Jewish state in Palestine. Only after Asad's advent to power, "[T]he words 'solidarity' and 'steadfastness' began replacing the word 'rejection' in official Syrian vocabulary regarding Syria's relationship with Israel."¹ However, Egypt's official defection from the Arab front in 1979 raised Syria to the position of the major Arab player in the conflict. The ensuing years proved that the leadership jacket was snug on Syria. Asad was able to play a weak hand skillfully, by partly mobilizing Arab public and resources, by using terrorism, and by exploiting the superpower rivalry to enhance its standing against Israel. Although Asad formally accepted UN Security Council Resolution 242 and 238, Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories, he neither envisioned nor pronounced a bilateral negotiation with Israel. He always preferred UN-sponsored international negotiations in which the Arabs would, and must, be a single party. Therefore, Syria's participation in U.S.-sponsored peace talks was perceived as Asad's concession from his preconditions.

Syria's participation in the process pleased the people who expected that the peace talks would put an end to the region's violence, instability, and economic backwardness. Contrary to these great expectations, however, the Syrian-Israeli negotiations soon ended in a deadlock without much progress. There is no doubt that both sides contributed to the failure of the negotiations. On the Syrian side, there are internal

¹ Talcott W. Seelye, "Syria and the Peace Process," in *Middle East Policy*, Vol.II, 1993, No.2, p.105.

factors, mostly emanating from Syrian strategic and political culture, to obstruct further advancement on the road to peace.

A. THEORIES APPLICABLE TO SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY: REALISM AND CONFLICT LINKAGE

Syria has been ruled by a man, who surrounded himself with obedient followers whose loyalty to their master outweighs their competence in state affairs. The ruler, Hafiz al-Asad, relies on nobody's mind but his own. He rarely meets, and consults with, even his chief lieutenants. As far as foreign policy is concerned, he is the only brain and voice of Syria.

All major –and many minor- decisions in Syria are made by Asad. His decisions are not subject to bureaucratic review or delays, with regard to the Peace Process. This means that the ultimate –and only- Syrian decision belongs to Asad.²

From this perspective, the first thing in evaluating Syrian attitude in the peace process is to study Asad's personal way of thinking regarding foreign policy in general and Arab-Israeli conflict in particular. As noted in the earlier chapters, Asad is a realist politician in international relations.

The roots of the realist tradition go back to Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes. Machiavelli was the first modern realist to emphasize the use of force by states to reach their goals. In his famous book, *The Prince* (1532),³ Machiavelli advises rulers about how best to use force or power in political life, and suggests a revolt against the utopianism. He establishes three founding principles of the realist school. First, history is a sequence

² Mary E. Morris, *Prospects for a Lasting Peace in the Middle East: Impressions from a Trip to Syria, Jordan, and Egypt* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1992), pp.3-4.

³ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910).

of cause and effect. Second, theory does not create practice, but practice creates theory. Finally, politics is not a function of ethics, but ethics of politics. He claims that morality does not necessarily create power, in contrast, morality is the product of power.⁴

Thomas Hobbes, English philosopher and political theorist (1588-1679), argues that relations among persons in a society controlled by the state do not look like relations among sovereigns (states) where there is no Leviathan to maintain order. In Hobbesian view, international relations is a state of war of all against all, an arena of struggle in which state is pitted against each other. The particular international activity is war itself. International relations should be regarded as a zero-sum game, in which the interests of each state exclude the interests of any other. In other words, in this anarchic domain, the source of one's own comfort is the source of another's worry.⁵ As a result, every state faces a "security dilemma" in international relations. From realist point of view, the doctrine of "harmony of interest," the fundamental argument of idealism or universalist thought, is a trap of predominant powers who want to keep the status quo. Therefore, every peace is hegemonic, and international peace is a vested interest of hegemonic powers.

The most elaborate and doctrinal work on what we call "the classical realist theory" or "realpolitik" came from Hans Morgenthau. Morgenthau's basic assumption was that international politics was a struggle for power and states defined their national interests in terms of power.⁶ The basic function of a state is the pursuit of interests. He was always critical of statesmen acting according to ideological or universalist principles

⁴ Edward H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crises 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York:Harper and Row, 1964), pp.63-93.

⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1909).

⁶ This assumption exactly fits Max Weber's definition of politics as the struggle for power.

rather than national interests. The rational choice, Morgenthau argues, is one best satisfying the national interests.⁷ It should be emphasized that Morgenthau's political realism does not totally discard the moral significance of political action. He just argues that universal moral principles can not be applied to the actions of individual states.

Many analysts and political scientists criticized Morgenthau. Modifying his principles, Kenneth Waltz formulated a new school of thought known as "structural realism," or "neo-realism." Waltz mostly focused on the structure of state system and the distribution of power within the system. In other words, he tried to explore the power hierarchy in the international system and its stabilizing effect on the system. While Morgenthau sees states as lusting the power, Waltz sees them as searching security in international anarchy. In his work, fear substitutes for ambition. The key element of neo-realist view is "international anarchy." The term "international anarchy" corresponds with the premise that the sovereign state exists in an anarchical society in which it is radically independent, neither bounded nor protected by international law or treaties, and hence insecure. Therefore, each state has to rely on its own strength to survive.⁸

As noticed from preceding explanations, the both schools come to the point of "security dilemma." The distinction between them is that the neo-realists are always concerned about too much and too little power. Only appropriate amount of power is a useful tool in international relations. While weakness is nurturing the adversaries' ambition, excessive strength stimulates the competition in armament, a condition further escalating international anarchy.

⁷ See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

⁸ See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

It is obvious that classical realism points at "balance of power" in foreign policy while neo-realism reminds us of "the bipolar international system" of the Cold War. We will see how Asad has shifted between the two approaches since his takeover of the country, and how structural changes has influenced his realist stand in the peace process.

The major shortcoming of the realist school is that by foreseeing a zero-sum game between states, it overlooks international organizations, law, alliances, and economy. Most importantly, the realists generally downplay the internal dynamics affecting a state's political behavior in international relations. In reality, a majority of area scholars agree on "the existence of close connections between Syrian internal and foreign policies, pointing out the relationship between Syria's internal political instability and her involvement in external conflicts, such as the inter-Arab, Arab-Israeli, and superpower conflicts."⁹ In this respect, Syria sets a very good example of "linkage politics state."

James N. Rosenau was first to coin the term "linkage politics" in an attempt to explore the connection between domestic politics and international political behavior of a given state.¹⁰ His works primarily focus on how international relations have an impact on internal political actors, and how the interaction between internal actors influences the political behavior of the state in international arena. In this context, there is a relationship between internal and external conflicts.¹¹

This relationship has been formulated in two hypotheses that somewhat contradict each other. First, conflict with another group generally increases the cohesion of a group. Therefore, regimes lacking legitimacy or suffering from internal conflicts tend to search

⁹ Yaacov Bar-Simon-Tov, *Linkage Politics in the Middle East, Syria between Domestic and External Conflicts 1961-1970* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), p.61.

¹⁰ James N. Rosenau, ed., *Linkage Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1969).

¹¹ Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1956).

for external enemies, real or imaginary, for the purpose of pushing internal problems into the background. Second, contrary to the first premise, social systems lacking solidarity are likely collapse in the face of an outside conflict threatening seriously. In other words, domestic instability sometimes promotes stability in inter-state relations.

Applied to Syrian case, the Syrian despotic regime naturally follows a “conflict-prone” foreign policy to divert the public attention, to justify its anti-democratic rule, to increase national patriotism, and to settle the home. At the same time, being aware of the country’s internal weakness, the Syrian leadership avoids a decisive collision with external enemies. This policy is exactly what President Asad has adopted since the last Arab-Israeli War in 1973. He has externalized domestic conflict by pursuing a conflict-oriented foreign policy in the region. However, he has never allowed the escalation to get out of his control.

As a conclusion, Syria’s standing in the peace process has been determined by Asad, and by the interaction between the ruling elite, interest groups and opposition. In terms of methodology, similar to what we made in the previous chapter, we are going to look at the response of the leadership and ideology to the Peace Process. Then, the possible effects of peace on the elite cohesion will be under discussion.

B. LEADERSHIP, IDEOLOGY, AND PEACE

Asad is not an elected leader; in contrast, he came to power by means of intrigue and military power rather than a general consensus of the Syrian people. As noted earlier, his regime lacks a democratic tradition, and the decision making process is based on an inner circle headed by Asad. Given his personal ambition and some visible qualities in foreign policy, every single Syrian move in international politics can be directly ascribed

to him. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Syrian stance in the Middle East Peace Process is a product of Asad's way of strategic thinking.

While pursuing a realist foreign policy, although failed sometimes, his major concerns are the security of Syria and the survival of his rule. He devotes all of his energy and considerable tactical ability to the containment of Israel by whatever means necessary. As a reflection of his realist orientation, he mostly regards the Israeli-Syrian interaction as a zero-sum game, even in the peace process. His historical record introduces a great deal of evidence to justify this assumption.

1. Asad and the Syrian-Israeli Conflict: A Historical Background

Following his advent to power in 1970, the recovery the Golan Heights from the Israeli occupation became the most important foreign policy objective for Asad. President Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt, too, wanted the Sinai Peninsula back. Realizing that Kissinger was preferring a "stalemate" and maintenance of status quo,¹² both Arab leaders conclude that negotiation could not successfully address the issue of the occupied Arab lands by Israel in 1967. They believed that "war was only recourse to activate diplomacy, and improve the Arabs' bargaining position."¹³ Then came the war on October 6, Yom Kippur, 1973. Egyptian and Syrian troops simultaneously launched an attack on Israeli positions in Sinai and the Golan Heights.

Although the Arab forces succeeded in penetrating into Israeli positions on both fronts, and the Syrians seized most of the Golan Heights, the Israelis' quick recovery from the first shock reversed the events in the war. Upon Israeli request, the U.S.

¹² Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1979), p.359.

¹³ Janice G. Stein, "Flawed Strategies and Missed Signals: Crises Bargaining Between the Superpowers, October 1973," in David W. Lesch, ed., *The Middle East and the United States, A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), p.210.

government carried out a massive airlift of arms, ammunition and spare parts to Israel. To prevent Israel's collapse, on October 19, \$2.2 billion emergency aid was given to Israel. Additionally, President Nixon put all U.S. forces worldwide on military alert to deter the Soviets' contemplated unilateral action in favor of the Arabs.¹⁴ Finally, Israeli counterattacks defeated the Syrians and Egyptians successively.

Asad held the U.S. responsible for both the outbreak of the war and the Arabs' defeat. Therefore while other Arab parties were participating the Geneva Conference co-chaired by the U.S. and Soviet Union, Syria boycotted it. The U.S.-Egyptian relationship was seen as the linchpin of the American policy in the post-war era. It was again Kissinger who could perceive Syria's importance gradually. In December 1973, Kissinger first met Asad in Damascus to find a tough and intelligent man. "After six and one-half hours talks with Asad, Kissinger left for Israel empty handed."¹⁵ During Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy," the two men met several times. Asad was a tough negotiator, but, at least he was a statesman to whom the Americans could talk. Finally, Syria was persuaded to sign the Disengagement Agreement on 31 May 1974 by which it recovered only Qunaitra, the capital city of Golan. However, the war enhanced Syria's position in the Arab world. Syria became the leader of the Arab world after the Camp David Treaty, which was always denounced by Asad as a Zionist-American conspiracy conducted to split the Arab front against Israel.

Making Asad realize the fact that the recovery of the Golan Heights by military means was a distant possibility, the Yom Kippur War opened a channel of

¹⁴ George Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), p.130.

¹⁵ William Quandt, *Peace Process* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.196.

communication between the U.S. and Syria. The Americans realized that Syria was a major player in the Middle East Peace Process. The Syrians acknowledged that there would be neither war nor peace in the Middle East without U.S. participation. U.S.-Syria relations, thus, began to turn into a normal diplomatic dialogue, if not a friendly relationship. President Nixon visited Asad in June 1974 in Damascus. Full diplomatic relations were restored on June 16. Moderate financial U.S. aid was granted to Syria. On May 9, 1977, President Carter met Asad in Geneva, and they demonstrated mutual cordiality and respect to each other.

Another stage of the Syrian-Israeli struggle was Lebanon. The first stage of the Lebanese civil war began in April 1975. Inasmuch as the U.S. government treated Lebanon as a secondary issue in a broader Middle East context, and it did not upset U.S. strategic interests, the Ford administration first kept a low profile. As the ongoing crisis grew more acute with hundreds of casualties every day, and the indications that Syria and Israel might intervene militarily at any moment became apparent, the American concern began to increase.

The Syrian intervention in Lebanon illustrates Asad's political and strategic maneuver capability. In December 1975, Syria presented a proposal to the warring factions to stop fighting. The U.S. government gave tacit or even explicit approval to this action. The rejection of the proposal by the Christian leadership of Lebanon in January 1976, the military violence began to escalate in the country. From then on, the U.S. overtook the role of a main channel through which Syria and Israel could communicate. Upon Israeli and U.S. approval, Syria's military intervention began on 31 May, and finally brought some order to Lebanon. As a result, the U.S. began to view Syria's role in

Lebanon as a stabilizing factor consistent with U.S. objectives. But, Asad was playing his own game in Lebanon. The rationales behind the Syrian intervention in Lebanon were already mentioned in the second chapter.

Asad easily managed to mitigate the Arab condemnation of the Syrian intervention in Lebanon by seeking reconciliation with Sadat in return for Egypt's endorsement of Syria's predominant role in Lebanon. Moreover, he convinced the Arab Summit to accept the Syrian permanent stay in Lebanon under the name of "Arab Peacekeeping Force."¹⁶

In the following years, weak Lebanese governments were unsuccessful to rein the Palestinian organizations raiding into Israel along the border. These attacks generally led to disproportionately massive Israeli reprisals causing unprecedented suffering in the civil settlements. In the meantime, the Israeli-Syrian relations were continuously deteriorating, and the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights appeared to be a spark of a military confrontation. President Reagan had to send his personal emissary, Philip Habib, to the Middle East to prevent this possibility in 1981. Despite of the U.S. efforts to stabilize the region, Washington-Damascus relations were worsening, and Reagan administration concluded that all foreign forces should withdraw from Lebanon to give way to a strong central government.

However, the Israelis had a grand plan about the future of Lebanon. Especially Defense Minister General Ariel Sharon was advocating a pro-Israeli Lebanese regime under Maronite militia leader Bashir Gemayel after the crushing and dismissal of the PLO from Lebanon. He even hoped to humiliate the Syrian military, and topple Asad's

¹⁶ Quandt, p.249.

regime. Although whether the Americans agreed on this plan is not clear, there are some indications that the Israelis informed the U.S. administration of their intention before the military action. At least, Haig's pro-Israeli attitude, Reagan's failure to take a firm stand, and his view of the issue within the Soviets-West context were perceived by the Israelis as an American green light.¹⁷

Finding the pretext to invade Lebanon when an assassination attempt was made against the Israeli Ambassador to London, Israel launched a major invasion of Lebanon, "Operation Peace for Galilee," on June 6, 1982. During the first stage of the war, the U.S. administration adopted a kind of "crises management" approach, but failed. On June 8, 1982, the UN Security Council drafted a resolution to condemn the invasion, but it was vetoed by the U.S. delegation.

In Lebanon, the Syrians were not successful in avoiding a direct military confrontation with Israel. Using Syria's massive reinforcement into the Beqaa Valley as a pretext, the Israelis attacked them, and knocked out Syrian SAMs. After that Syria took a different course in order to contain Israel by employing an indirect engagement strategy by means of anti-Israeli militia groups and terrorists.

Israel's only success was the evacuation of the PLO from Lebanon. Then, Secretary Shultz worked out an agreement between Israel and Lebanon by which Israel undertook to withdraw from Lebanon, provided Syria would withdraw simultaneously. That is, the U.S. gave priority to an Israeli-Lebanese negotiation by excluding Syria from the process. Syria rejected the idea, and Asad refused to see U.S. envoy Habib in Damascus. Then, the Israeli troops unilaterally retreated from Shouf Mountains to a safer

¹⁷ Quandt, p.340,342, Lenczowski, pp.218-219.

line, leaving the U.S. marines in crossfire between warring faction. The U.S. troops, although for their own safety, got involved in the fighting by siding with the Maronites. Syria overtly supported the Druze-Shia coalition, and two U.S. planes were shot down by Syrian fire. In Lebanon, Asad used his usual methods to deal with his adversaries. First, pro-Israeli Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel was assassinated. Then, on October 23, 1983, a truck loaded with TNT was driven into U.S. marine headquarters, and the explosion left 265 marines dead. The suicidal driver was thought to be a pro-Syrian and Iranian-backed Shiite militant. After President Reagan evacuated the marines from Lebanon by February 1984, exposed to Syrian pressure, Lebanese President Amin Gemayel had to cancel the Lebanon-Israel agreement of May 17, 1983. Thus, the only winner appeared to be Syria in the Lebanon Crises.

The Document of National Accord signed by Lebanese deputies in Taif, Saudi Arabia, in 1989, and the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination between Lebanon and Syria in 1991 confirmed the special influence of Syria in Lebanon. Today, Syria is acting like a mandate power in Lebanon.

Because of the car bombing, the U.S. Congress cut off the modest economic assistance that Syria had been receiving since 1975. The U.S. administration intensified its criticism on Syrian sponsorship of international terrorism. The relationship deteriorated continuously to the degree that Asad bitterly condemned the Reagan Plan as a plot to encircle and isolate Syria. The U.S. peace efforts to work out agreements between Israel and Syria's neighboring Arab countries were obstructed by Asad. "The

U.S. does not have an independent policy in the Middle East;" he said, "it implements the policy that is decided by Israel."¹⁸

In 1980s, the Syrian regime was associated a number of bombings, assassinations, hijackings in the Middle East and abroad alike. Asad always supported violent Palestinian factions, like Ahmad Jibril's PFLP-General Command, against Arafat. He collaborated with the Iranians to back Shiite organizations in Lebanon. Asad also provided the PKK, a terrorist organization operating in Turkey, with safe havens in Syria and Syrian-controlled Lebanese territory.

Bombing Libya and being aware of Syria's role in terrorism, the U.S. sent strong warnings to Syria. The Hindawi affair, an attempt to place a bomb on an Israeli airliner, discredited Asad whose intelligence was seemingly behind the attempt. Following this event, the U.S. and several European countries imposed economic sanctions and withdrew their ambassadors from Damascus.

Asad's response to the U.S. was a shaking and devastating one. Syria, with excellent timing, uncovered the U.S. and Israeli arms deal with Iran that was depicted as a terrorist state by both countries. "The Reagan administration was soon paralyzed and distracted by the resulting Iran-contra scandal."¹⁹

In the meantime, Syria realized that being isolated in the region was the last thing to want. The Syrian government took some disciplinary actions against intelligence officials held responsible for involving in terrorist activities. Abu Nidal's group was expelled from the country, a gesture resulting in the return of the U.S. ambassador to

¹⁸ Jimmy Carter, *The Blood of Abraham: Insights into the Middle East* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), p.81.

¹⁹ A.Drysdale and R.A.Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), p.196.

Damascus. Asad promised to move against Ahmad Jibril provided convincing evidence about his involvement in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 was available. Because Asad's moves against terrorism were only in rhetoric, Syria continued to remain on the official "terrorist list" of the U.S. State Department.

Nevertheless, U.S.-Syrian relations improved during George Bush administration. For the sake of Lebanon's stabilization, the U.S. opposed General Aoun's attempt to oust Syrian forces from Lebanon.

2. The Post-Cold War Era in the Conflict: Asad and the U.S.-Sponsored Middle East Peace Process

The Cold War interests dictated the U.S. to protect its strategic partner Israel, to support the moderate Arab states providing the U.S. with an unimpeded access to petroleum, and to limit the Soviet influence by putting down its renegade regimes in the region.

During the Cold War, Syria was a radical Arab state rejecting Israel's existence, and a client of the Soviet Union with anti-Western credentials. These were enough reasons for the U.S. policymakers to abstain from a friendly posture toward Syria. After the Cold War, however, some unprecedented developments caused the two countries to realize that, whether they liked each other or not, the successes of their policies in the region, to some degree, overlap. As pointed out by Drysdale and Hinnebusch, "[I]f Kissinger believed that there could be no war in the Middle East without Egypt and no peace without Syria, Asad believed that Syria could not wage a war without the Soviet Union and could not achieve peace without the United States."²⁰

²⁰ Drysdale & Hinnebusch, p.198.

This state of rapprochement was further enhanced by Syrian participation in the coalition forces against Iraq. Then, Syria's flirtation with the West ended in an engagement ceremony; Syria joined the U.S.-brokered peace negotiations in 1991. It was somewhat surprising because Asad gave up his long-standing preconditions for the talks. First, he gave up a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Second, he accepted that negotiations would be sponsored by the U.S., and held as direct talks with Israel in contrast to his almost two-decade old demand of UN auspices.

The peace process, which began with the Madrid Conference in late October 1991, was able to make the Syrians and Israelis hold the first face-to-face talks since the conflict first erupted. Although seven years passed after the commencement of the peace talks, however, little progress was made except some procedural matters in discussion. The mutual distrust, domestic political concerns of the both sides, the continuous harassment of Israel by Lebanon-based terrorism, Syrian insistence on supporting terrorist organizations, the assassination of Rabin, and Israeli disproportionate military reprisals brought about a lot of setbacks in the process. Most importantly, the two sides have had different terms for peace, and Syria's commitment to conciliation is open to doubt. Today, the Syrian-Israeli leg of the negotiations is almost stalled, and there is little hope for its resumption. In addition to the Likud victory in the Israeli elections in 1996, Asad's personality and strategic style has played an important role in this result.

The first question to address for this matter is what peace means to Asad. The Syrian-Israeli conflict has four dimensions that have to be settled in a peace agreement. They are territorial dispute (Golan), a viable security arrangement for the future, an agreement on a sphere of influence, and overcoming the long-lasting hatred and distrust

(full reconciliation).²¹ The meaning of peace in Asad's mind has traditionally dealt with the first aspect of the conflict; that is, the territorial issue. Asad envisions a peace only resulting in the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. Anything that falls short of the full withdrawal of Israel from the occupied territories is unacceptable for him. During the peace process, he, to some extent, adopted a more compromising attitude toward the Israeli demand of a reliable security arrangement in the Golan region. At some moments, the Syrians were "open to the presence of a UN (or other multinational) peace-keeping force," and they seemed willing to accept "a demilitarized Golan, but only in return for Israel's demilitarizing part of the Galilee."²² Although not pronounced publicly, Syria may agree on a "staged withdrawal from the Golan over a period of several years providing there were a specific timetable and a specific terminal date, and also providing Israel recognized Syrian sovereignty over the Golan."²³ As seen clearly, Asad's well-advertised expression "a peace of the brave" does not have a different meaning from "the full and unconditional Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights." He never wants Syria's predominant position in Lebanon and over the Palestinians to be a matter of negotiation. Furthermore, pointing out that it is a right and privilege of a sovereign state, Asad overtly renounces any promise to the Israelis for full peace-normalization of the bilateral diplomatic, cultural and economic relations.

As for the Israelis, they are willing to "seek a broad, all-embracing accord,"²⁴ but excluding the territorial issue with some minor concessions. Most of the Israeli political

²¹ See Alon Ben-Meir, "The Israeli-Syrian Battle for Equitable Peace," in *Middle East Policy*, Vol.III, No.1, 1994, pp.70-83.

²² Stephen Zunes, "Israeli-Syrian Peace: The Long Road Ahead," in *Middle East Policy*, Vol.II, No.3, 1993, p.65.

²³ Seelye, pp.107-108.

²⁴ Aryeh Shalev, *Israel and Syria: Peace and Security on the Golan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p.7.

factions, no matter they are from the left or right, agree on the fact that the Golan Heights are a strategic asset for Israel's security and water resources. They always rejected a full relinquishment of the Golan Heights even after the negotiations started. The Israelis want the Syrian side of the borderline in the Golan demilitarized, full peace, and Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. The Likud's coming to power certainly aggravated the cleavage between Syrian and Israeli positions in the negotiations. Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu, totally reversed the process by saying that "Israel would hold negotiations without any preconditions imposed by the Syrians," and by suggesting a "peace for peace" instead of "land for peace" based on UN resolutions 242 and 238.²⁵

It would not be a prophecy to predict that the new Israeli position did not shock Asad because he had certainly known this consequence when the peace process first began. Then, why has Asad tried to demonstrate a strong commitment to peace? Isn't he serious about his pro-peace rhetoric? Kamel Abu-Jaber, the Jordanian Foreign Minister in the Madrid Conference in 1991, answers the question quite straightforwardly:

I don't think Asad wants peace. He has lived and breathed Ba'thist, anti-Zionist ideology for 50 years, and I don't think that changes so quickly. Asad does not want to go down in history as the man who compromised with the Zionists. That is not his dream. So why has Asad gone through the motions if he is not serious [about peace]? After the Gulf war there was open talk of fixing the guns on Syria after Iraq-that Syria was next. Asad went to Madrid to keep the U.S. off his back. He wanted to make sure that Damascus was not next. Don't forget, this regime is still on the U.S. terrorism list so his fears are not exaggerated.²⁶

²⁵ Helena Cobban, *Syria and the Peace Process, A Good Chance Missed*, SSI Special Report (Carlisle:U.S. Army War College, 1997), p.31.

²⁶ As quoted in Glenn E. Robinson, *After the Peace: Elite Cohesion and Political Stability in Syria*, presented to the PENTAGON, 9 October 1996, p.4.

Asad's initial accommodating posture in the peace process was a well-considered tactical move. Needless to say, the most important reason compelling Asad to join the peace process was the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The tragic collapse of the Eastern Bloc robbed Syria of its vital military and financial suppliers. It was no more a viable option for Syria to insist on a "strategic parity" with Israel. Additionally, Syria would not exploit the superpower rivalry to sustain the balance-of-power in the Middle East. Secondly, the recovery of the Golan Heights by military means was to be crossed off the agenda. In addition the end of the Cold War made this option obsolete, "Syria would certainly be inviting disaster to take on Israel alone, and the reconstruction of a supporting Arab war coalition is unlikely, especially after the destruction of Iraq's military power."²⁷ Third, given the fact that Syria was suffering from a devastating economic crisis, Asad had no option but to court the West, especially the U.S. "For Asad, normalizing relations with the U.S. offers a critically important domestic political cover which he needs if he is to play his indispensable role in the peace process."²⁸ Finally, Syria had to respond positively to the call of Israeli Labor government who had announced that it was ready to negotiate on the basis of "land for peace." If Syria had insisted on the old motto "no recognition, no negotiation, no peace," it would have been called "the uncompromising party" of the conflict. Conversely, Syria feels comfortable today to depict the Israeli side as intransigent.

In sum, one can say that the Syrian decision to join the process was a rational act of a realist leader. On the other hand, regional and domestic transformations which are to

²⁷ Drysdale & Hinnebusch, p.206.

²⁸ Ben-Meir, p.77.

be brought about by peace suggest that Asad's aversion to peace is as realist as his participation in the peace negotiations.

The regime type of Syria constitutes a major obstacle to the Peace Process. The Syrian regime is a dictatorship with a monarchical taste in some respect. Despite a constitutional façade, Syria has been ruled by decree, and its ruler employs a wide variety of oppression, intimidation and persecution methods to survive. Although Asad has made some progress in expanding his political base in the society, the Ba'thist regime is still seen as an illegitimate minority-based rule within and outside Syria. Syrian internal quietness is completely misleading, and it has been achieved at the expense of human rights and even basic individual liberties.

Asad is realist enough not to sign a peace agreement with Israel as long as a latent hatred remains intact to debilitate the internal peace and the regime itself. The suppression of the Hama uprising and murders of opposition leaders at home and abroad certainly crushed the organized resistance. However, the hatred toward the regime did not dissipate; instead, rooted deeply. As long as Israel continues to be the archenemy of Syria, it will be very easy for the regime to brand any opposition move or figure as a Zionist plot, or an agent of the enemy. Moreover, as noted earlier, the existence of a strong external threat is a convenient instrument to divert the public attention, especially from demanding liberalization, and to mobilize patriotism to conceal the corrupt face of the government.

The second argument to explain Asad's anti-peace thinking is related to the Lebanon dimension of the peace process. "For a long time, Syria was far less interested

in peace with Israel than in Lebanon.”²⁹ Although the recovery of the Golan Heights is a matter of honor saving for the Syrians, Lebanon is a much more valuable asset for them. The strategic importance of the Golan Heights in terms of security and water resources is more vital for Israel. Inasmuch as the Golan provides only Israel, Jordan and Lebanon with water, its importance for the Syrians comes from the topography. Given the fact that an Israeli attack to Damascus without a strong Syrian provocation seems a distant possibility, the topography of the Golan Heights loses some of its functions for the Syrians. As for Lebanon, it is the Syrian economy’s open door to the world. Lebanon is also a patronage “cash cow”³⁰ to bribe the military leaders whose loyalty Asad desperately needs to sleep comfortably in his palace. Manipulating Hizballah against Israel, Syria also has an advantage to use Lebanon as a launcher platform and a bargaining chip. If a viable regional peace is to be installed, Israel is supposed to demand a full Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in accordance with the Taif Accord. In other words, Syria will have to make a choice between the Golan and Lebanon instead of having both of them. In short term, Syrian crippled economy and its elite coalition are likely to prefer Lebanon to the Golan Heights because Lebanon is central to the success of Syria’s regional designs. Another possibility is a compromise between the Syrians and Israelis to remain in Lebanon together, i.e., keeping the status quo. This is not logical from inter-Arab political context because Syria is accused of selling Lebanon for the sake of Syrian interests.

The Palestinian connection of the Peace Process and how Asad took hostage the Palestinian problem give clear-cut evidence about Asad’s unreliability as a negotiation

²⁹ Ben-Meir, p.76.

³⁰ Term belongs to Robinson.

partner. Asad's term "comprehensive peace" covers all the parties in the region, and intends to resolve all issues of contention, including the Palestinian problem. He has always opposed separate peace talks with Israel. Viewing separate talks as a Western trick to provide Israel with a strong hand, Asad has insisted that the Arabs should sit around the table as a single delegation. That is, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine together constitute a single Arab party.

The Syrian regime has used a popular slogan "Palestine before the Golan" for years. Syrian officials frequently reiterate that the Golan was lost in the fighting for the Palestinian cause. This does not mean that the Syrian regime is very fond of the Palestinians. Everybody interested in the Middle East knows that Asad many times allied with the adversaries of the Palestinian movement. The main objective of the pro-Palestinian rhetoric lies on the regime's search for legitimacy and its will to remain as the Palestinian's patron. Asad always rejects the idea of an independent Palestine. He is pleased with a struggling Palestinian entity within Israel, because it is a leverage in the Syrian-Israeli bargains. Although few studies pay special attention to the following assumption, Asad has had a grand design for the Levant, the Greater Syria, during its implementation the Palestinians will play a premiere role. Asad's ultimate goal is the unification of Palestine and Jordan. He assumes that the Palestinians, a more politically active and mobile people than the Trans-Jordanians, will be able to oust the Hashemite dynasty, and radicalize the Jordanian politics. The next phase is to build a satellite government like what happened in Lebanon, hoping to pave the way to the unification with Syria ultimately. This is exactly the same as what Nasser did to Syria, and a very

dangerous scenario for the future of the region. This argument, notwithstanding provocative and unacceptable for both Israel and Iraq, is not a distant possibility.

Fortunately, the Palestinians know how unreliable Asad is, and that he always pursues his interests first while giving lip service the Arab cause. Their bitter experiences enable the Palestinians to foresee that Asad is going to use them until he gets what he wants, and then he is likely to run. This is why the PLO reached an interim accord with the Israelis in September 1993, in Oslo, through secret negotiations. Being shocked and outflanked by Israeli-Palestinian talks, Asad was, reportedly, very angry at the Palestinians for moving ahead on negotiations for an interim agreement. His response was a usual one: to intensify the terrorist actions to undermine the bilateral talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. "Asad has allowed radical anti-PLO Palestinian groups a safe haven including those who have threatened Arafat and other Palestinian leaders and engaged in terrorist acts which have jeopardized PLO-backed peace initiatives."³¹ The terrorists in Palestine whom Arafat has failed to control have taken orders from Damascus. Not only in Palestine but also in Southern Lebanon, the Syrian regime officially rejects to rein violent organizations, and even encourages them in spite of strong warnings from the U.S. and Israel. The negotiations were frequently suspended just for this reason. Now, Asad's foot-dragging is not a mere "wait-and-see" policy. Moreover, he expects to take credit because he is resisting so-called "Zionist-U.S. imposed peace process" while the PLO is betraying its own cause by seeking a resolution outside of inter-Arab framework.

³¹ Zunes, p.63.

Syrian state sponsorship for international terrorism raises serious suspicions about Asad's commitment to peace. "Syria provides sanctuary to as many as twelve terrorist organizations,"³² and at least eleven terrorist organizations have headquarters in Damascus.³³ From Japan to Western Europe, a number of terrorist organizations that are outlawed by their own governments come to Syria to find a safe haven there. Asad views them as legions to be used for Syrian interests, or as bargaining chips in Syria's foreign relations. However, they are so powerful in some respects that they have the ability to influence their master's decisions. Syria's engagement in state terrorism and its insistence on doing so can impede the peace Process in the following ways. First, these organizations know what may happen to them if a peace agreement is signed, and naturally they object to peace. They do not lack a communication line to impose their will on the leadership since the security apparatus and military are tightly bound with the terrorist circle. The Syrian government can not disregard them because they know a lot about the regime's crimes. In other words, terrorism is no more a simple tool of Asad, in contrast, Asad is a captive in the hands of terrorism in some respects. Second, even though the Syrian regime has a serious desire to conclude a peace agreement, the terrorists can undermine the process by conducting a few violent attacks without Syrian will and knowledge. Finally, Syrian insistence on making use of terrorism as a political means further alienates the Israelis, and causes Syria to lose its reliability before the West.

One of Asad's major concerns in the Peace Process is about the post-peace Middle East. Asad fears that the Peace Process, if successful, leads to the Israeli's

³² Ben-Meir, p.74.

³³ Turkish daily newspapers *Milliyet*, *Hürriyet*, and *Sabah* dated 7 and 8 October, 1998.

economic and military hegemony in the Levant. Syria's economy is too weak to compete with Israel, and in steady decline because of dropping oil revenues. Asad is well aware of that in the post-peace era, Israeli businessmen will invade Damascus, Amman and Beirut in retaliation for withdrawing from the Golan Heights. This is why Asad has opposed the concept "economically integrated Middle East," an implementation of "interdependency theory" to stabilize the region. In a Syrian diplomats words: "How can you integrate two economies when one has a per capita income of \$900 per year and the other has a per capita income of \$15,000 per year?"³⁴ Not only from Israel, Syria also tries to avoid being outflanked by Turkey and Iraq after the peace because of the first's economic and demographic potential and the latter's oil.

Syria is a country where it is impossible to obtain a credit card from a bank, the importation of canned sardines must be approved by a committee headed by Prime Minister, and the access to the Internet is a prerogative of the regime's high-ranking constituencies. Then, Asad's fears are quite realist and understandable.

He always keeps in mind that his grand claims over Lebanon and Jordan have been obstructed by the Israeli denial. In the post-peace scene, the Jordanian monarchy and even Lebanese Maronites are likely to get closer to Israel to save themselves from Syrian irredentism. Coupled with the growing Turkish-Israeli cooperation, the fear of a new axis against Syria upsets Asad's sleep whose country has nothing to do but encircled.

The recent Turkish-Israeli cooperation has emerged as a new underlying factor in the Middle East politics and security. "Operation Reliant Mermaid," a joint naval

³⁴ Interview with Walid al-Muallim, Syrian Ambassador to Washington, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Winter 1997, pp.81-94.

exercise between the Turkish and Israeli navies with the participation of the American Sixth Fleet, was conducted between 5-7 January 1998, off the Mediterranean coast of Israel. It was a small-scale search-and-rescue operation with only 1,000 sailors aboard five vessels, two Turkish, two Israeli, and one American. Despite its peaceful purpose and small size, "[F]ew military maneuvers are likely to be more closely watched- or bitterly condemned- by the Arab world than Operation Reliant Mermaid."³⁵ It was perceived by the countries of the region and outside observers as a symbol of a deepening alliance between the two countries. Alan Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Middle East Politics described it "as probably the most dramatic strategic development in the Middle East since the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty ended the prospect of a multi-front Arab assault on Israel."³⁶

"Operation Reliant Mermaid" was a part of military, economic and cultural cooperation between Turkey and Israel, and in fact, it is somewhat exaggerated. The exercise was open to all countries of the region, but only Jordan sent its Commander of the Navy as an observer. Other Arab states and particularly Syria exploded in condemnation. As a demonstration of the counteraction to the joint naval exercise, Iran, Iraq, and Syria got together in March, 1998, supposedly to form an alliance against Turkey and Israel. Nicholas Burns, the speaker of the U.S. State Department, condemned their action, and he labeled these three countries as a group of dictators whom nobody would join.³⁷

³⁵ Lee Hockstader, "Turk-Israeli Exercise: An Alliance Building Stem," *Washington Post*, 20 December 1997, p.1.

³⁶ Stephen Kinzer, "Turks and Americans Assess Hopes and Realities of Ties," *The New York Times*, 10 March, 1998.

³⁷ Savaş Sūzal, "Bunlar Gūruh," *Sabah*(*Turkish daily*), 3 March 1997.

Asad fears from the emerging cooperation because Turkey and Israel have some common aspects making the cooperation rational for them. First, they are bound by their suspicion of Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Second, both of them suffer from the terrorism sponsored by their neighbors, mostly by Syria. Third, they identify with the West, and they are important allies of the United States. Finally, and probably most important, they are the only two secular and democratic countries in the Middle East. The symmetry between the interests of the two countries makes this relationship turn into a viable partnership.

Coupled with Jordan's growing friendship with Turkey, The Turkish-Israeli partnership becomes a source of frustration for Asad. His most pragmatic response was to open the Iraqi pipeline, which Syria closed during the Iran-Iraq War, as an overture to Saddam. However, inter-Arab rivalry and two-decade long hostility are likely to prevent these two dictators from falling in a love with each other overnight. Turkey and Israel declared that their cooperation was not a defense pact, and it did not aim at any third country. Amikam Nahmani of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies clearly stated: "Nobody expects Turkish soldiers to come and defend us, or us to go defend them."³⁸ However, Asad still interprets the Turkish-Israeli relationship as a Zionist and Western plot to enhance Israel's position in the peace process by undermining the balance-of-power. He is so dependent on power and intrigue that he can not see the fact that the Middle East needs a "international order" based on trust and cooperation rather than an "Arab order" based on ethnicity. Therefore, he may quit disturbing Turkey for a while in

³⁸ Samar Assad, "Israel-Turkey Military Ties Grow," *Associated Press*, September 8, 1998.

order to avoid being encircled. However, he should not be expected to give up his inflexible posture in the peace process in short term.

To say the least, a realist Asad who views the Syrian-Israeli talks as a zero-sum game is not a promising figure for a peaceful Middle East.

3. Ba'thist Ideology and Peace with Israel

The Ba'thist ideology must be counted as a major obstacle to the Peace process. As noted before, the original principles of the Ba'th Party ceased to be the ideological pillars of the regime. "Socialism" and "freedom (anti-imperialism)" are difficult to sell, and already dropped from contemporary rhetoric. According to some prominent area experts, the Gulf War obviously marked the end of Pan-Arabism. In reality, its retreat began with the Arab defeat in the Six Day War which was regarded as "the Waterloo of Pan-Arabism." Even before that, Saud's victory over the Hashemites who were Pan-Arabist, and the emergence of Muslim Brotherhood as a universalist movement against Pan-Arabism were the harbingers of the upcoming decline of this ideology. As for Asad, as a cautious member of a minority sect, he never harbored any romantic idea about Arab unity, and focused on regional Syrian nationalism.³⁹

Anti-Zionism is the most striking component of the updated Ba'thist ideology. Therefore, Asad's resistance to peace with the Zionists is a realist standing in the sense that otherwise, he would be chopping his own feet.

No other issue has shaped modern Syria the way its conflict with Israel has, so the ideology of anti-Zionism and its concomitant justification of authoritarian rule have some historical basis. For a regime which has defended its authoritarian rule on ideological grounds, the signing peace

³⁹ See Fouad Ajami, "The End of Pan-Arabism," in Tawfik E. Farah, ed., *Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), pp.95-115, also in *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1978/79.

with Israel is not ideologically difficult, but raises questions of its own *raison d'être*.⁴⁰

Despite the fact that Syria can not afford a direct military confrontation with Israel one more time, a full reconciliation with Israel, on the other hand, may deprive Syria of some material resources badly needed in domestic economy.

Syria's posture as a "credible" enemy to Israel is not only of ideological and legitimacy importance. It has also been, as shown, a crucial element of the country's political economy. Only by means of its constant and demonstrative mobilization of society, the maintenance of a huge army, and the allocation of enormous resources to the military could Syria secure the strategic rent which it has collected from the wealthier Arab states...⁴¹

From ideological point of view, Asad can not afford the consequences of a compromise with the Zionist entity which must eventually disappear according to the Ba'thist thought.

C. ELITE COHESION AND PEACE

Asad does not go beyond the safe lines of his maneuver ground in the peace process. He certainly analyzes the problem how peace may influence the regime's survival. "A solution of the Arab-Israeli dispute could hardly fail to activate the 'Great Game' once more in the Levant, with Syria at the center of it for very economic, geographic and military reasons that make it of such cardinal importance."⁴² This game will not be played with guns but with culture, science, and money between ex-belligerents "for the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of the Lebanese, Jordanians, and Palestinians."⁴³ As shown, Syria is not ready to fight on none of these battlefields. Given

⁴⁰ Robinson, p.33.

⁴¹ Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995), p.264.

⁴² David Roberts, *The Ba'th and the Creation of Modern Syria* (New York: St. Martin's Press), p.151.

⁴³ Hisham Melhem, "Syria Between Two Transitions," *Middle East Report*, Spring 1997, p.5.

its economic vulnerability relative to Israel, the peace process has increased the pressure on Asad's regime to accelerate economic liberalization. Accordingly, economic reforms are to be accompanied by political liberalization. How economic and political liberalization upsets the fragile elite cohesion in Syria was already discussed in the previous chapter. In brief, it is plausible to argue that eventually opening an avenue to liberalization, peace can bring about the defection of some members from the ruling coalition.

The Syrian regime, if it wants, can prepare and persuade the general public including peasantry and public sector employees for a just peace. Experiencing a decline in its weight inside the regime, the Ba'th Party also does not constitute a major opposition front against peace. The Islamist opposition is too disorganized and fragmented to manifest its will in the process. Asad's personal stature can overcome to silence minor anti-peace obstacles either by persuasion or intimidation.

The minorities, especially the Alawis, generally oppose the Syrian-Israeli reconciliation. Their fear from peace is not totally baseless since "[T]he removal of the Arab-Israeli dispute from the agenda might also allow the Sunni-Shi'a division to occupy the main attention of the Arab world and thus become sharper..."⁴⁴ Syria, in particular, can not afford such an agenda shift that might deepen the existing cleavages between its religious sects. The Alawi community of Syria thinks that a peace agreement signed by Asad would be perceived by the Sunni majority as the Alawis' betrayal to the sacred mission to destruct the Zionist State. An internal strife and the fall of the Ba'thist regime undoubtedly deprives the Alawis of their privileged status, and it is even likely for the

⁴⁴ Roberts, p.151.

Alawis to be pushed down to a second-class citizens status as a reprisal of the past. Although the Alawis are not monolithic toward the peace process, and they are not the only player in the decision-making, their opposition to peace should be taken seriously.

The most serious opposition to peace is likely to come from the partners of what we called "the strategic coalition" in the third chapter.

Peace causes the emergence of new losers and winners in Syria. The military and security apparatus are, and will be, obviously critical of the peace process because the existence of a challenging external threat provides the commanders with a strong say in Syrian politics. They easily obtain what they want for the military profession in financial and social terms. They have a well-paying intermediary role between the businessmen and government. The elimination of the Syrian-Israeli hostility will rob them of these prerogatives. The political liberalization as a result of peace will make it necessary to rearrange the officer corps in accordance with the country's demographic balance. This correction can be achieved only at the expense of minorities. Needless to say, the decline of the military's profile within the system inevitably leads to the rise of the economic power, the military's rival, to prominence.⁴⁵ Thus, "[P]eace will magnify the extant cleavages within the military-merchant complex, increasing the centrifugal forces which separate political from economic power in Syria."⁴⁶

The military commanders' primary concern is about the loss of Lebanon as a result of peace. First of all, the deployment of a considerable amount Syrian troops and their success to keep Lebanon relatively silent raise the reputation of the military in the

⁴⁵ Joseph Bahout calls this process as "the demilitarization of the political system," See his "The Syrian Business Community, Its Politics and Prospects," in Eberhard Kienle, ed., *Contemporary Syria, Liberalization Between Cold War and Cold Peace* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p.78.

⁴⁶ Robinson, p.12.

eyes of the public and government. More importantly, in the case of Syrian withdrawal, Lebanon will cease to be the major source of income for corrupt military officers and their civilian merchant partners in illicit activities. It should be kept in mind that the illicit trade only in narcotics originating in Lebanon values at around \$2 billion per year.⁴⁷

Syrian economic power, the private capital at large, has growing interests in terminating the half a century-old state of war with Israel, but not immediately. The Syrian business class hopes to benefit from the outcomes of the peace process. The Syrian regime, they know, will have to implement serious economic and political liberalization projects in order to join the post-peace competition safely. The new order will raise the private capital's economic power, and enable them to translate it to political participation in the system. On the other hand, Syrian business world is also aware of possible costs of a hastily arranged peace with Israel. First, Syria lacks the necessary infrastructure for the market economy, i.e., banking, stock market etc. Second, an internal disorder as a result of peace destroys the domestic market totally. Finally, there are some business people making money from their association with the regime. They do not want an open market economy based on free competition.

The business world's attitude toward the withdrawal from Lebanon may take two forms. First, Lebanon is a safety valve for Syrian entrepreneurs whose activities have been limited by deficient economic infrastructure and bureaucratic obstacles in Syria. Lebanon, as a free capitalist market, grants them whatever they can not find in Syria. In this respect, unless the Syrian regime does not take necessary measures to eliminate the need for Lebanese economic institutions, the Syrian capitalists do not approve the

⁴⁷ Fred H. Lawson, "Domestic Transformation and Foreign Steadfastness in Contemporary Syria," *Middle East Journal*, Vol.48, No.1, Winter 1994, p.58.

withdrawal from Lebanon. On the other hand, the withdrawal from Lebanon obviously decreases the growth rate of the Syrian economy, and leaves the regime no choice but to implement economic reforms rapidly. This is what Syrian businessmen have demanded from the regime for decades.

As a conclusion, the rising Syrian bourgeoisie, in long term, favors the Syrian-Israeli conciliation because peace would strengthen its bargaining power in the politics. Yet, they have little to gain from a "peace now."

D. SUMMARY

Syria is a state without whose consent and participation a viable peace can not be established in the Middle East. The other Arab participants of the peace process are not capable of making their mind on their own irrespective of Syrian approval. In contrast to most assumptions, Syria's relatively accommodating position in the peace process does not stand for a fundamental change in Syrian foreign policy. The Syrian leadership's primary objective in joining the negotiations was to improve the country's image, and to avoid being victimized by the new world order. The political and strategic culture of the Syrian regime, together with other factors, impedes the leadership from signing a full peace agreement with Israel.

Asad's personality, especially his suspicious and obstinate nature, and dangerously realist orientation, refrains him from a compromise by making concession, and constitutes a major obstacle to the peace. The dependence of the Syrian regime on a person and the blurred future of the country after Asad cause a lack of confidence in the Israeli side, a situation prolonging the peace process. Additionally, Asad's failing health is a source of concern not only for the Israelis but also for himself. Asad is a sick man

living under medical care. He does fear that his sudden death could magnify the side effects of peace.

On the other hand, Asad's anti-peace posture, in near term, does not seem thoroughly irrational from his point of view.

The *de facto* no-peace-no-war situation that has prevailed, with notable interruptions, between Israel and Syria from 1974 to date, has in fact served Syrian regime interests best. It provided a legitimacy background at home and among the Arab public, secured strategic rents and Syria's regional and international weight, and did not—as out-right war would have done—endanger the material benefits which the country could draw from its strategic position, or the army itself.⁴⁸

Due to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Syria is the only connection between the Arab-East and the Mediterranean Sea, a well-paying advantage that is to be partly lost if a full peace is established. Additionally, Syrian internal stability is too vulnerable to moral consequences of a peace agreement with a country preached as the eternal enemy. Syrian economy is too weak to bear the burden that will be imposed by the post-peace competition in the region. The security apparatus and the military are not ready to relinquish their upper hand in the politics and prominent status in the economy. The withdrawal from Lebanon as an obligation of the peace agreement is a constant nightmare for the Syrian leadership, ideology, military and business world.

In brief, Syria's revolutionary activism is over, and now it is a country of *status quo*. Hence, Asad and his men are in no hurry to sign a peace agreement and to forget the 50-year old belligerency with Israel.

⁴⁸ Perthes, p.265.

V. CONCLUSION

The longevity of Asad's political life, almost three decades only in the post of the presidency, gave him all moral and material opportunities to stamp his personality on every aspect of the Syrian state and society. He personalized the regime to the degree that "Syria Arab Republic" practically became a "Syria Asadi Kingdom." As a result, Asad's personal thinking and manner in intra and international affairs is the cornerstone of understanding Syria. The cult of Asad, together with the culture of the pretenders who are milking the economic and social resources of the state, really matters for one who is in search for a comprehensive study of a one-man rule.

Asad sowed the seeds of dictatorship into the fertile soil of Syria that is located within the boundaries of traditional oriental despotism. The survival of his one-man rule for three decades with considerable successes, notwithstanding by means of ruthless and indiscriminate violence, suggests that the seeds were not sown in a wrong field. He at least managed to preserve the integrity of the country where the centrifugal forces have potentially posed a serious threat to the regime. Given the fact that Syria with its name, geography and demographic structure is an artificial political entity, Asad has managed, although partially, to consolidate Syria's place in the family of nations.

The first and perhaps weakest aspect of Syrian political and strategic culture is, as noted several times, its dependence on the personality of one man. The second point is Asad's realist orientation that sometimes impedes him from seeing options other than power to reach his goals. His blind reliance on power, and renunciation of other rational ways makes him a dangerous player in domestic and international arenas. He would like to be seen as a tough, able and steadfast ruler especially by outsiders. In reality, this

offensive posture is not a product of either the regime's stability or the country's formidable strength. His behavior looks like that of a man who is walking alone in the night, and making noise to overcome his fear from the dark. In other words, he is applying an offensive strategy, so-called active defense, to protect his regime and his country. Disabled by the country's economic and human limitations, and internal unrest, Asad generally avoids confronting enemies directly. In contrast, he prefers an indirect engagement strategy, using third parties against his enemies or playing off internal factions one another.

He preferably externalizes the internal conflict by aggravating Syria's external problems with neighboring countries. Syria's traditional enemy is Israel. In Asad's thought, what is to the interests of Israel is against the interests of Syria. "Anti-Zionism" and "Greater Syria," an irredentist nationalist goal to dominate the whole Levant, are the essence of Asad's Ba'thist rule. According to the Syrian regime's official rhetoric and logic, Lebanon and Jordan are the natural parts of Syria. Asad's thought has been deeply influenced by inter-Arab rivalry. Therefore, he takes his every step cautiously so that he does not lose credit in the eyes of the Arab world.

There is little doubt that the major internal problem faced by the Syrian regime now is to address the liberalization issue. The Syrian government's policies to modernize the economy have proved ineffective since the so-called Investment Law 10 had not reached beyond some make-up measures to satisfy the Damascene business class who traditionally collaborate with the regime. Syria's reluctance in liberalization is quite observable in the sense that neither Asad nor his close circle and the main beneficiaries of the regime have intended to transform the country into a free market democracy. While

Asad fears from the political consequences of economic liberalization, more precisely from the collapse of his dictatorship, the military-merchant complex do not want to lose their source of income as a result of free competition and the rise of a real bourgeoisie. Anyway, Asad allows some policy implementations softening the state control as a facelift for the regime. At the same time, he strictly monitors the process lest a large deviation from his direction can cause a sudden breakdown that he may fail to prevent. By the same token, political liberalization, Asad thinks, robs the regime of its essential means to contain Islamist militancy.

Syria's foreign policy has been in a state of real confusion in the Middle East peace process. Syrian posture toward a comprehensive peace is a vital issue to determine its place within the future international architecture in the Middle East and even in the world. Almost everybody agrees on the fact that Syria is the key country for ending the negotiations with a comprehensive peace in the region.

Although Syria joined the U.S.-brokered Middle East peace process in 1991, little progress has been made, except for some procedural matters, in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations. Indeed, the whole process almost stopped since it largely depends on a Syrian-Israeli compromise. The Israeli-Palestinian talks have continued due to U.S. pressure on both parties, but no full solution in sight. The Arab world in general and Syria in particular blame the Israelis for undermining and stopping the process. However, Syria is not totally innocent of the failure.

First, Asad's uncompromising and obstinate nature, deriving from his excessively realist orientation and his feeling of insecurity, is a major obstacle to peace. He views the Syrian-Israeli relationship as a zero-sum game, and the conflict as the essence of his rule.

Syria's economic weakness for a post-peace rivalry, the possibility of the loss of Lebanon, the reaction of the people, opposition and the Arab world are Asad's major concerns. Second, the Alawi minority who enjoys a privileged status in the regime is very critical of the peace process. Third, the Ba'thist principles justifying the authoritarian rule already ceased to be the founding ideology. Now, Anti-Zionism remains the foremost ideology of the Ba'thist rule. So, the elimination of the Arab-Israeli conflict really shakes the ideological foundation of the Syrian regime. Finally, a Syrian-Israeli peace certainly upsets the elite cohesion in Syria. Accelerating the pressure on the regime for more liberalization, a Syrian-Israeli reconciliation grants the business people an upper hand not only in the economy but in politics as well at the expense of the military. Therefore, the military and internal security apparatus have little to gain from peace. In brief, Syria is not ready to sign a peace agreement with Israel in the near term.

This study has by no means argued that the failure of the process is merely a product of Syrian attitude. The Syrian people really need, and hunger for, economic well being, democracy, and peace. They deserve them. After all, there is a strong correlation between external peace and internal prosperity. Peace is a precondition to expatriate the Syrian capital in Europe or elsewhere, and to invite foreign investors to Syria. Economic and political liberalization, on the other hand, is the only way to transform Syria's political economy and to create a new strategic and political culture compatible with peace and democracy.

Asad depicts a new Pharaoh in his person by depriving Syrian people of their most natural rights to live in a peaceful and prosperous environment, and by undermining international understanding and trust. Unfortunately, as long as he remains at helm, it is

unlikely to witness neither a peaceful Syria nor a peaceful Middle East in the near term. Unless Asad and the thought represented by him are put into history's dustbin, the international community is likely to continue to deal with an anti-democratic, uncompromising Syria who employs a conflict-oriented foreign policy as a figleaf on her unforgivable crimes.

However, it should be pointed out that there is a gradual and irreversible evolution toward peace. The tyranny and economic infirmity, both Ba'thist institutions, have lost altitude in the face of contemporary developments in our planet. Asad has spent whatever he had at his disposal to resist to the new world order. Sooner or later, a comprehensive peace advantageous to all parties has to be reached. However, it is almost certain that the Syrian signatory at the peace table will not be Asad but his successor. Therefore, the interests of the Syrians and the Middle East are vested in the disappearance of Asad and his school from the scene as soon as possible. In this respect, the succession of Asad and the post-Asad era in Syria appear as excellent topics for further research.

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