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**SYRIA'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER BASHAR AL-ASSAD:  
CHALLENGE AND CHANGES**

**By**

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# Syria's Foreign Policy under Bashar Al-Assad: Challenges And Changes

Joelle Hanna Makdessi

## Abstract

Analysts predicted a shift in Syria's foreign and domestic politics after the death of Hafiz el-Assad in 2000. Expectations were high that Bashar will initiate political, social and economic reforms. These expectations began to fade when Bashar's policies started looking more of an extension of his father's policies. Though Bashar introduced significant domestic economic reforms, his foreign policy choices remained anchored on his father's geopolitical principles. Nevertheless, Bashar's geopolitical world changed after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. This thesis examines how Bashar responded to the geopolitical threats unleashed by the invasion and occupation of Iraq. It traces the continuity and change in Syria's foreign policy under Bashar in a number of pertinent geopolitical theatres, namely Lebanon, Iran, Turkey and Iraq. The thesis closes by evaluating the impact the 2011 popular protests in Syria on Bashar's foreign policy choices.

Keywords: Syria, Bashar, Hafiz, Foreign Policy, Balance of Power, Realism.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*“The foreign policy of states is shaped by their national situations, by the values and perceptions of policy-makers, and by the global and regional environments in which they exist” (Paul Noble 1991).*

### **1.1 - Situating the Thesis**

After the death of Hafiz el-Assad in 2000, international and domestic analysts saw in Bashar el-Assad the possibility of a shift in Syrian politics. This stemmed out of Bashar’s foreign education. The bets were high on seeing in Bashar the initiator of political, social and economic reform in Syria. Nevertheless, this bubble of change started to slowly fade away when Bashar’s policies were based on an extension of his father’s policies. Though Bashar has introduced some changes in the domestic affairs of Syria, yet his foreign policies followed the footsteps of his father’s. It is very important to note here that the difference between the political eras between Hafiz and Bashar resulted in a shift of Bashar’s foreign policies with some countries such as the Lebanese-Syrian relations and the Iraqi-Syrian relations.

Hafiz el-Assad’s foreign policy is what earned him the respect of the Syrian people and of the Arab World making it hard for Bashar to side track from it. Many of Hafiz’s foreign policy decisions lay behind his popularity especially when it came to his Arab nationalist rhetoric. The Arab-Israeli conflict and his position on it accentuated his popularity and were used wistfully to fulfil his foreign policy aspirations. Hafiz used his obstinate position on not signing a peace agreement with Israel until the acquirement of all occupied territories especially the Golan Heights to gain popular sentiment. This



fact made him different from Egypt's Anwar el Sadat, Jordan's King Husayn and PLO's Yasir Arafat in the eyes of the Arab people.

During his rule, Hafiz el-Assad dedicated more attention to foreign policy than he did to internal affairs. Even Syrians who criticize his authoritarian rule admit that he was a "master player in the regional and international arenas, skilfully extracting the maximum returns from often unpromising circumstances" (George 2003, 17). Hafiz had always pursued control over Syria's direct neighbours, formerly "Greater Syria".

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Hafiz el-Assad's foreign policy is what earned him the respect of the Syrian people and of the Arab World making it hard for Bashar to side track from it. Many of Hafiz's foreign policy decisions lay behind his popularity especially when it came to his Arab nationalist rhetoric. The Arab-Israeli conflict and his position on it accentuated his popularity and were used wistfully to fulfil his foreign policy aspirations. Hafiz used his obstinate position on not signing a peace agreement with Israel until the acquirement of all occupied territories especially the Golan Heights to gain popular sentiment. This

fact made him different from Egypt's Anwar el Sadat, Jordan's King Husayn and PLO's Yasir Arafat in the eyes of the Arab people.

On the other hand, Bashar's accession to power was a smooth one since the stakes were highly set on him. This was evident in his inauguration speech when he declared that he would not only lead the country based on his father's policies, he would also develop these policies further to better serve Syria. In his first years in power Bashar realized that his plans for reform were far-fetched within the status quo though his presidency stemmed out of the same regime. The Baath regime presented a dilemma for Bashar as he could not attain the reforms Syria needed under its rule or could his presidency survive without this specific regime.

As a reaction to this bleak picture, Bashar appointed new political figures which might help him in his strategy. He consolidated a personal staff of young men of his age to assist him in leading Syria towards change, people like Imad Zuhayr Mustafa, Sami al-Kuhaymi, Abdallah al Dardari, Mohammad Mahir Mujtahid, Durayd Dargham, and Mohammad Sabuni. These are technocrats who were able to introduce administrative as well as economic reforms to the country. However, this group does not have a power base in the country.

In the meantime, Bashar needed the presence of the powerful men who had supported Hafiz el Assad's regime, like the Assad and the Makhluaf clans and the Kalbiyya tribe, as well as high ranking Alawi officers, to manage the affairs of the state and to preserve the security of the regime. Bashar's first years in the presidency have shown that he is introducing economic reform in Syria while maintaining the geopolitical orientation of the foreign policy inherited from his father.

Looking at Bashar's foreign policy and comparing it to Hafiz's one cannot but realize that the former has not always been a continuation of the latter's policies. Bashar's foreign policy choices are best explained as reactions to his geopolitical context of the region. This is an important angle to look at since Bashar is not deviating from his father's foreign policy, but rather responding to new geopolitical challenges.

## **1.2 - Research Question**

What explains Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Assad? And how is it different from that of Hafiz al-Assad? These are the research questions that drive this thesis. Bashar has maintained the geopolitical orientation of his father's foreign policy but has taken it to new dimensions given new geopolitical challenges and opportunities. This will be demonstrated through a number of case studies of Syrian foreign policy towards Iran, Turkey, Israel, Iraq, and Lebanon.

The most important objectives of Hafiz el Assad's Syrian foreign policy were the peace talks with Israel, recovering the Golan Heights, Syria's regional and international power and its relations with the neighbouring Arab countries (Ghadbian 2001, 627). Syria's foreign policy has been determined by its Arab nationalist identity. Bashar el Assad's greatest concern is the recovery of the Golan Heights from Israel. It is also concerned with balancing its power against Israel, to the West, and the United States in Iraq, to the East (Hinnebusch 2010, 5). Bashar's reaction to the pressure put on him by the U.S. has been to build alliances with countries in the region and globally starting with Turkey (Hinnebusch 2010, 11).

## **1.3 - Methodology**

This thesis uses the case-study method to look at the transformation of Syrian foreign policy under Bashar's presidency. It examines Bashar's policies towards Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Lebanon. The thesis also discusses the United States' policy towards Syria and the latter's reaction to it. This thesis explains Bashar's behaviour vis-a-vis the balance of power theory which is based on a geopolitical explanation of foreign policy choices. The qualitative approach used in this thesis employs both primary and secondary sources. The former consist of newspapers and Bashar's speeches, while the latter includes books, articles and internet sources. These sources are used to examine the geopolitical transformations in Bashar's foreign policy in comparison to Hafiz's.

#### **1.4 - Map of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the thesis, examines the research question and the methodology to be used in the paper in trying to answer the research question.

The second chapter presents the theoretical arguments explaining Bashar's foreign policy choices in relation to Hafiz's, it also provide a brief introduction about the background of the Baath party and about Hafiz al-Assad. This chapter undertakes this exercise through a realist explanation of the Syrian foreign policy mainly focusing on Bashar el-Assad's international and regional foreign policies. The geopolitical approach towards foreign policy making is discussed by explaining the different characteristics of this approach from the realist point of view.

The third chapter explains Hafiz's realist foreign policy legacy and those foreign policy decisions taken by Hafiz and continued under Bashar. This chapter discusses how Bashar el-Assad has maintained his father's strategy in his relation with three

countries Iran, Turkey and Israel. His strategy was born out of his need to sustain Syria's strategically powerful position in the Middle East and as a part of the strategy to balance the power of Israel in the region. The chapter starts by studying the Syrian-Iranian relations and how they evolved between Hafiz and Bashar. This will be discussed while emphasizing on the friendly relations that persisted even with the United States as well as international opposition to these relations. Then this chapter moves to studying the Syrian-Turkish relations that have always been characterized of being relatively quiet but not absent of tensions. It will explain the reasons behind this tension by focusing on issues related to border, problems pertaining to water and river right, political orientation, to religious stance, smuggling, drug-trafficking, and terrorism. It will also discuss how the two governments renounced obvious aggression, and how their relations developed in the 1980s in comparison to the 1950s and 1960s. Finally this chapter tackles the Syrian-Israeli relations, how it is directly linked to the Arab- Israeli conflict and how it is the enduring struggle in Syria's foreign policy. It will discuss Syria's main aim to retrieve the occupied territories through the peace talks it held with Israel as well as the attacks it constantly initiated at the Lebanese Southern borders.

The fourth chapter looks at Bashar's geopolitical battles which led him to make transformations in Syrian foreign policy. It examines Syria's reactions to a number of geopolitical shifts in Iraq and Lebanon. This chapter examines how Bashar el-Assad survived the pressures exerted on him by the American administration which led to the Syria Accountability Act in hope that Syria would cave in and relinquish its 'anti-Western' foreign policy. These pressures culminated after the war on Iraq when the U.S. stated that Syria deliberately opened its borders and allowed Islamic terrorist to

cross into Iraq. Then this chapter examines how Bashar el-Assad reacted to these pressures, and how he had to change his father's policy towards Iraq and Lebanon because of the new challenges Syria faced. It starts by the Lebanon case from its occupation by Hafiz el-Assad to the redeployment of the Syrian troops under Bashar el-Assad with a focus on the Syrian support for Hizbullah in order to pressure the Israel. It also examines the Syrian-Iraqi relations which shifted from ultimate animosity under Hafiz to neighbourly relations under Bashar after opposing the 2003 military attack on Saddam Hussein. It focuses on the reasons behind this shift with a discussion of Syrian-American diplomatic struggle.

The fifth chapter concludes the thesis and its aspects, a discussion of the current situation in Syria will follow. It will discuss the current uprising in Syria, with questions on how the long-lasting focus on foreign relations, with Hafiz and Bashar, rather than internal problems is no longer benefiting the regime in Syria. Also it will examine the relations between Syria and its neighbouring countries, such as Turkey, have been affected by this uprising.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE REALIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

#### **2.1 - Introduction**

This chapter examines the characteristics of the realist theory of international affairs, its evolving forms and the challenges facing its supporters in the past decade. In a brief explanation of the realist's theory, two rival theories are also examined; the two theories are liberalism and constructivism. Some of the founding scholars and latest prominent practitioners of these theories mainly used in this analysis are Morgenthau, Walt, Hinnebusch and many others. Of course the debate over which theory is the best to apply on foreign policy-making and in analysing state behaviour is an on-going dispute since the birth of these theories.

This chapter undertakes this exercise through a realist explanation of the Syrian foreign policy mainly focusing on Bashar el-Assad's international and regional foreign policies. The geopolitical approach towards foreign policy making is discussed by explaining the different characteristics of this approach from the realist point of view.

This chapter also traces back the historical background of Hafiz el-Assad's rule in Syria highlighting his regional and international relations since his accession to power in 1970. After his death in 2000 and Bashar el-Assad's succession to power started, some policies were maintained while others changed. The historical background sheds light on the similarities and differences between father and son's foreign policies in both the region and internationally.

## **2.2 - Review of Foreign Policy Theories**

The on-going debate in the explanation of political actions is usually based on the ideologies of the parties or politicians involved. Explanation of politics cannot be achieved without going back to its core. Even politicians who disapprove of ideological theories base their decision-making on their own theoretical background and conception of the world order. Thus the scholarly work of international relations is of great importance to practitioners as it is to students and academics. Theories help us make sense of the bulk of news that we receive all the time.

The three competing paradigms explaining foreign affairs relevant to the study at hand are realism, liberalism and constructivism. These three theories all have their share in explaining modern world policy making. Nonetheless “no single approach can capture all the complexity of contemporary world politics” and we should be using a set of competing ideas instead of basing our explanations on one single theory (Walt 1998, 30).

One of the founding scholars of the realist theory, Hans Morgenthau, explains that statesmen think mainly of interest defined as power. This idea of interest is the core of politics and is not marked by the concept of time and place. In the ongoing struggle of the protection of national security, statesmen have tried to acquire as many power resources as possible. As such, in an anarchical international system, relations between states are defined by their level of power which is derived from their military and economical capabilities (Morgenthau, 1998).

Stephen Walt explains the three evolving forms of realism which are the classical, neo-realists and defensive realism. In his analysis of these different forms, Walt traces back the classical approach to Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr who



“believed that states, like human beings, had an innate need to dominate others, which led them to fight wars” (Walt 1998, 31). The idea of dominance of others has been obtained out of the intrinsic needs of human beings and applied to states.

As for neo-realists like Kenneth Waltz, they focused their justification of state behaviour on the need for survival on their own. However, the anarchic world order is a set back to the attainment of such a notion. Waltz goes on to consider that weak states tend to balance against more powerful states rather than bandwagon with them (Walt 1998, 31).

The third approach Waltz took into consideration was the newly found offense-defence theory. These scholars such as Robert Jervis, George Quester, and Stephen Van Evera deduced systematically that since war is more likely in the case of offence of different states against each other, defence would be an easier alternative for these states’ cooperation process. Instead of trying to conquer each other and lose, they are more prone to cooperate once they realize it is more fruitful. (Walt, 1998, 31)

Thus, states tend to be defensive and great power wars happen because states create an “exaggerated perceptions of threat and an excessive faith in the efficacy of military force” (Walt 1998, 37). On the other hand, Randall Schweller pointed that statesmen like Adolf Hitler and Napoleon Bonaparte are offensive and they yearn for is more important to them than what they have. Also, Peter Liberman explains that the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe and the Soviet control of Western Europe both benefited from their conquests more than it cost them. Finally, theorists of offensive realism like Eric Labs, John Mearsheimer, and Fareed Zakaria claim that states tend to increase their strength relatively in a state of anarchy because they never know when a political power might rise (Brooks 1997, 50).

However, the liberal founding fathers Emmanuel Kant and Woodrow Wilson argue that realism does not account for progress between states. Liberals predict the path away from the anarchic world of the realists through economic relations between states. They explain that democracies will not wage wars on each other because they find the other legitimate (Snyder 2004, 56). Several scholars claim that globalization; the creation of non-governmental institutions and the increasing spread of worldwide communication is decreasing states' power and moving their attention away from military concern more towards economics (Walt 1998, 40). However the persistence of conflict between states even in the era of economic interdependence and globalization "does not surprise realists" (Snyder 2004, 57).

Jack Snyder supports Walt's argument by noticing that each theory not only gives an explanation of its own but is a check on the others. The three theories point out the weakness in the arguments of modern politicians which leads to misguided policies (Snyder 2004, 55). Focusing on Walt's explanation of the three theories, Jack Snyder emphasizes that international affairs theories are still needed to explain foreign policy decision-making of politicians such as Georges W Bush and Condoleezza Rice.

The study of international relations is supposed to tell us how the world works. It's a tall order, and even the best theories fall short. But they can puncture illusions and strip away the simplistic brand names- such as "neocons" or "liberal hawks"- that dominate foreign-policy debates. Even in a radically changing world, the classic theories have a lot to say (Snyder 2004, 53).

Realism explains international affairs as a conflict between self-interested states. Realists are pessimistic about human nature and states' urge to go to war. However, Snyder is more optimistic and argues that it is not necessarily the case; a vicious rationality about power struggle can lead into a more peaceful world. In the last decade the realist approach had an appeal in U.S. politics.

Realists best explain post 9/11 U.S. behaviour. They argue that the United States as a state has grown far more powerful militarily than any of its rivals, leading to use its power to try to dominate other states for security reasons. This fact, Snyder explains, undermines the concept of balance of power which is realism's main thesis. No alliance of states can face the American's military power. Even the policies of France and Germany can challenge the United States diplomatically which can be seen as classical balancing of power; however, they do not oppose its military dominance.

The United States due to its geographical distance from other parts of the world does not usually impose an immediate threat to other countries. An example is the threat of Israel rather than the United States in the Middle East is the main drive for small countries to ally themselves together in an attempt to balance Israel's power in the region. (Snyder 2004, 56)

On the other hand, the main opposing theories to realism derive from liberal thought. Liberal theories discourage states from waging wars against each other due to economic interdependence. Another theory claimed that democratic states are less prone to waging wars than authoritarian states thus the path to world peace is the spread of democracy. The latest theory claims that international institutions help states overcome their search for immediate gains and look for long term relationship (Walt 1998, 32)

The latter theory is contradicted by a newer form of the realist theory related to the problem of "relative and absolute gains". Realists like Joseph Grieco and Stephen Krasner claim that anarchy entails states to worry about both angles of cooperation; absolute gains and how these gains are distributed among the parties. If one party

acquires more gains than the other, it will become strong and the other will become weaker (Walt 1998, 35).

Constructivism is realism's rival theory on the updated form of idealism. While realism and liberalism focus on substantial aspects, i.e. state power and economic relations, constructivism focuses on ideas, interests, and identities of states that are constructed throughout their history (Walt 1998, 40). Constructivist scholars focus on societies' trend of behaviour because it shapes their norms and interests. Furthermore, with the evolving norms of societies, some scholars are shifting their attention from the classic boundaries of states towards issues of identity. The way states would react in the international arena is based on the ideas they created of themselves. For example, the United States identifies itself as "a global policeman" and how European countries define themselves as part of a continent (Walt 1998, 41). It is important to note that ideas and identities change with time and this may create indirect alterations in states behaviour, which, in turn, leads to unpredicted changes in international affairs.

Constructivism is a valued theory in understanding post 9/11 era since it stresses on "the role of ideologies, identities, persuasion, and transnational networks" (Snyder 2004, 60). Constructivists argue that dispute about concepts is in the core of international relations. Authors such as Michael Barnett and Daniel Philpott best explain Arabs radicalism in post 9/11 internal relations of states (Snyder 2004, 61).

All these rival theories are required to construct a comprehensive understanding of states' behaviour, and they all have a part in explaining world politics. Nevertheless, this thesis suggests that realist explanation of international affairs best explains Syrian foreign policy. It will focus on the geopolitical status-quo and changes in the Arab region to explain Bashar el-Assad's continuation of his father's policy in regard to

certain neighbouring countries, as opposed to his change of his father's foreign policy towards other neighbouring countries.

### **2.3 - Explaining Syrian Foreign Policy**

Najib Ghabbian compares two spheres in Syrian politics, domestic affairs and foreign relations. He argues that Hafiz el-Assad's foreign policy is what earned him the respect of the Syrian people and of the Arab World; consequently, Bashar will not sidetrack from his father's foreign policy. Because Hafiz's foreign policy was viewed positively by the Syrians in specific and the Arabs in general. His perseverance on not signing a peace agreement with Israel until acquiring all the Syrian territory occupied by Israel is of a great stir to his popularity at the time. This fact made him different from Egypt's Anwar el Sadat, Jordan's King Husayn and PLO's Yasir Arafat in the eyes of the Arab people. Thus for Ghabbian, if Bashar el-Assad achieves peace with Israel on Syrian conditions, it will earn him the assertion he needs. (Ghabbian 2001, 626)

Nevertheless, domestic respect is not the only reason why Bashar will follow his father's foreign policy. Other reasons affect this behaviour, and these include Syria's regional and international position. For Ghabbian the most important objectives of Syria's foreign policy are the peace talks with Israel, recovering the Golan Heights, Syria's regional and international power and its relations with the neighbouring Arab countries (Ghabbian 2001, 627).

This thesis is also advanced by Raymond Hinnebusch. He argues that unlike the other Arab states Syria did not bandwagon with the U.S.; instead it balanced against U.S. hegemon. This is due to Syria's regional role that has been created by Hafizel-Assad. According to Hinnebusch, Hafiz has handed down his son not only a role to play

but “a tradition of realpolitik that came out of years of experience coping with Syria’s many more powerful enemies” (Hinnebusch 2010, 3). He explains that Syria’s foreign policy is determined by its Arab nationalist identity. His greatest concern is the recovery of the Golan Heights from Israel. It is also concerned with balancing its power against Israel, to the West, and the United States in Iraq, to the East (Hinnebusch 2010, 5). He proceeds by explaining that Bashar’s reaction to the pressure put on him by the U.S. was to build alliances with countries in the region and globally starting with Turkey (Hinnebusch 2010, 11).

A different explanation of Syria’s foreign policy choices has been presented by Marwan Kabalan. He argues that Syria’s domestic needs shape its foreign policy, and that the external context has always closely affected its domestic policies as Syria has used its foreign policy to “access resources needed for domestic security” (Kabalan 2010, 27). For Kabalan, Bashar’s foreign policy is a response to domestic needs directly linked to its security, especially in the geopolitical context (Kabalan 2010, 28). This was obvious in the friendly political and economic relations Bashar began to build with Iraq between 2000 and 2002 in exchange for Iraqi Oil. Of course Bashar was careful not to irritate the United States; he supplied the CIA with information on Islamic terrorists so the Bush administration wouldn’t oppose the transfer of Iraqi oil to Syria (Kabalan 2010, 31).

Another explanation of Bashar’s foreign policy is realpolitik. The case of his support of Iraq against the US invasion is a very important example. This attempt helped him in his strife to keep the balance of power with Israel. Bashar was certain that the war on Iraq was fought by the U.S. on behalf of Israel, so he was afraid that Syria will be in the middle of two hostile countries: Israel and pro-U.S. Iraq (Kabalan 2010,

32). This further proves the geopolitical theory behind Bashar's foreign policy decisions; in this case to keep the balance of power with neighbouring powerful countries. Moreover, Syria's geopolitical foreign policy is driven by its alliance with Iran which led to its disagreement with Saudi Arabia. Syria is not afraid of Iran's rising nuclear power and regional ambitions, as Saudi Arabia is. On the contrary it finds Iran a good ally against its more immediate neighbour and enemy, Israel (Kabalan 2010, 39).

David Lesch explains that Bashar does not have full authority inside Syria but he gained control over Syria's foreign policy after the 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon and the exile of Abed El Halim Khaddam. Even though the links between Damascus and Beirut were cut, this allowed him to achieve "ad-hoc responses" to external threats rather than having to operate in a long term policy as have been usually done (Lesch 2010, 45). This is an example of a change in Bashar's foreign policy decisions according to the geopolitical change in the region. Lesch also argues that Bashar's support to Hizbullah and Hamas has nothing to do with Iran, noting the ideological differences between the two; they are rather cards to play with on the peace negotiations table with Israel (Lesch 2010, 45).

Eventually, according to Lesch, what Bashar is trying to do is to make Syria a regional moderator and a problem solver, hence his policy of mending relations with both the neighbouring countries and the west. This explains his non-reaction toward; the Mughniyeh assassination in 2008, the Israeli strike on the 'nuclear sites' in 2007, and the United States' raid in October 2008.

Alan Makovsky supports this argument and suggests that Bashar has used his father's firm grip in a more systematic way in Syria's foreign policy. Makovsky explains that Bashar eases the tensions with neighbouring countries – for example by

constructing friendly relations with Iraq, Turkey and Jordan – to focus on his two major concerns Israel and Lebanon (Makovsky 2001, 1). He increased trade with Baghdad, made several friendly visits to Turkey, mended his relation with King Abdullah of Jordan, and has approached Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the same friendly intensions. However, these relations made the region more dangerous for the U.S.

After all, Bashar is still not planning to yield on the peace process with Israel and still supports Hizbullah (Makovsky 2001, 2). This view establishes how Bashar's policy is shaped by external threats to Syria's security, namely the United States' hegemony in the region. Makovsky fails to highlight how Syria's regional policy might affect the United States negatively.

Anders Strindberg explained how the Syrian opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and its support for Hamas, has shaped the American hostile policy towards Syria and how the latter has used Lebanon to twist Syria's arm through the Syria Accountability Act. Like Hinnebusch, Strindberg explains that Syrians are the most loyally nationalistic population in the Arab region. This is partly due to their Arab nationalism that dates back to the early twentieth century, and partly to the political education of resistance imposed by the Syrian government. Strindberg also argues that in geographical terms Syrian population finds itself between two "hotspots - the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and the U.S. occupation of Iraq" (Strindberg 2004, 55). He argues that this popular and official sentiment explains Syria's foreign policy towards United States' occupation of Iraq, Israel's occupation of Palestine, and Hizbullah's support in Lebanon. Nonetheless these policies are what triggered the U.S. to formulate the Syria Accountability Act in May 2004.



According to President Bush in an interview to the Egyptian Al-Ahram in May, “the Syrians will not fight terror and they won't join us in fighting terror” (Al-Ahram 2004). This is despite the fact that Syria has been very cooperative with the U.S. regarding the fight against terrorism since 9/11, by allowing the CIA to establish office in Syria and giving them valuable information about individuals having links with al Qaeda. In the same line of cooperation with the United States, Syria has made efforts to control its borders with Iraq, and this has been unofficially acknowledged by U.S. officials in Syria (Strindberg 2004, 60).

Bassel Salloukh examines how Lebanon was used as the card for the U.S. interest in the region. He explains that the suspicious control of Lebanon by Syria was the reason behind Hafiz el-Assad’s regional power since it was used to enforce Syria’s regional power. Hafiz and Bashar realized that the survival of the Baath’s regime is linked to the latter’s “role in its immediate environment” (Salloukh 2009, 159). Salloukh’s explanation of Syrian foreign policy encompasses several variables one of which is the balance-of-power. This is the basis of Bashar’s foreign policy choices which are formed according to external threats to Syria’s security, mainly U.S. hegemony and the Israeli threat.

Other arguments are at the domestic level; i.e. political economy, regime legitimacy, regime security and sectarian. The political economy theory is the realist way to explain Syria’s new liberal economic orientation, and its enhanced relationship with the East being a new market free of Western conditions. Regime legitimacy theory explains that Syria’s ruling regime which is a sectarian minority, in its goal to reach local legitimacy, assumes an Arab nationalist ideology. This argument is negated by Salloukh by saying that all peace negotiations with Israel failed not because of Hafiz or

Bashar, but on Israel's behalf. Sectarian argument highlights the Alawi identity of the ruling regime in Syria which identifies with Iran and Hizbullah as part of the Shi'ite crescent. However Salloukh argues that this theory does not explain Syria's support for the Sunni group Hamas, and does not explain Syria's policy towards the invasion of Iraq. Regime security theory assumes that Syria's foreign policy decisions are made based on its assessment of the external threats on its survival (Salloukh 2009, 161).

Another popular explanation of Syria's foreign policy choices looks at Bashar's inexperience and miscalculations which led to Syria's regional and international isolation. Theorists such as Eyal Zisser and Dennis Ross, base their arguments on Bashar's miscalculation which grounded on the neo-conservative assumption that states will bandwagon when facing a stronger military power like the United States. (Salloukh, 2009, 161) However, this was not the case with Syria after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The realist theory best explains Syria's behaviour which is balancing as opposed to bandwagoning. What helped Syria resist the U.S. threats to its geopolitical interests in the region is its foreign policy of "classical balancing, asymmetrical balancing and balking" (Salloukh 2009, 162). Bashar el-Assad's choices regarding his foreign policy towards Iraq and Lebanon are based on the balancing theory and regime security not his miscalculations, since Syria considered the invasion of Iraq as a direct threat to its geopolitical interest thus to the regime security (Salloukh 2009, 163).

The same threat was seen by Syria in US and European intervention in Lebanon through resolution 1559. Lebanon was used "as a beachhead against Syria" to weaken its geopolitical influence. Making Syria lose control over Lebanon and Hizbullah, and

spoiling its alliance with Iran, will push Syria to accept U.S. domination over the region, offer its assistance to the U.S. in Iraq and stop obstructing the peace process(Salloukh 2009, 167).

One of the authors who explain Syria's policies in its quest for regime legitimacy is Mordechai Kedar. He argues that the ruling regime attempts to construct its identity in order to legitimize itself by encouraging the "spirit of resistance". Kedar uses legitimacy to explain Syria's foreign policy, arguing that the conflict with Israel is what legitimizes El-Assad's rule and diverts the attention from internal problems. Consequently, Bashar's determination to recover all of the Golan Heights is actually intended to hinder the peace process and to blame it on Israel which leads to the persistence of the state of war thus legitimizing the regime. Also Kedar argues that when Assad enters in peace negotiations they are also linked legitimizing the regime by returning the Golan Heights (Hinnebusch 2010, 396).

The above theories explain the geopolitical drive behind Bashar el-Assad's hostile foreign policy decisions towards the United States in relation to Lebanon and Iraq. Fred Lawson provides a different angle to explain Syria's foreign policy, which is the policy of brotherhood with neighbouring countries. He explains Syria's relation with Iran by emphasizing the importance of Glenn Snyder's 'alliance dilemma'(Lawson 2007, 29).

The alliance dilemma, based on the realist explanation of foreign policies between states occurs when one partner assumes a reasonably hostile stand towards an opponent the other is likely to take initiatives and engage both of them in an unwanted clash. However, when one assumes an extremely hostile stand towards an opponent the other side is inclined to hold back in order not to engage in a general war. Similarly,

when one partner embraces a reasonable approach towards an opponent the other tends to take pre-emptive measures by shifting. But when one takes extremely pacifying steps towards an opponent the other is more likely to reinforce the alliance (Snyder 1997, 182).

Lawson suggests that Damascus's policy towards regional rivals is directly affected by its relation with Tehran. However to understand its connection with Syria's foreign policy towards Turkey, Iraq and Israel, Lawson reformulates Snyder's alliance dilemma. He suggests that the important issue is to differentiate between moderate hostility and severe hostility in a state's relation with rivals. Reasonable hostility is like Syria's deteriorating relationship with Turkey in the end of the 1980s, which made Iran take more hostile action which is its reinforced activity in Lebanon, which leads Syria to the risk of entrapment in an undesirable clash. Lawson describes the relationship between rival states as "U-shaped, rather than monotonic"; while "standing more and more firm vis-à-vis and adversary does not generate greater and greater incentives for allies to undertake risky initiatives" (Lawson 2007, 33).

Most Scholars have tried to explain Syria's foreign policy and the affecting constituents which play a major role in shaping it. Using the realist theory of balance of power, this chapter pinpoints the most important factors playing this role. Syria's foreign policy emancipates out of its role in the regional Middle Eastern politics and sets it in the middle of the Arab Israeli conflict. Due to this fact, Syria's foreign policy engineers mainly Hafiz and later on Bashar have strived to keep their policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Golan Heights in check to win over their people. As highlighted above, Syria's foreign policy stems out of the need to keep rallying the Syrian population with its governing system. Syria has also aligned itself with Iran in

order to protect itself against the U.S. hegemonic ambitions in the region especially after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nevertheless, Syria has made sure not to cut the umbilical cord with the states completely since it needs to leverage its economic survival through Iraq and as a way to negotiate the return of the Golan Heights. The next chapter will take a look at Hafiz el-Assad's foreign policies and how his son Bashar has maintained some and changed others.

#### **2.4 - Hafiz el-Assad's Foreign Policy Choices: Its Continuation or Change under Bashar**

During his rule, Hafiz el-Assad dedicated more attention to foreign policy than to internal affairs. Even Syrians who criticize his authoritarian rule admit that he was a "master player in the regional and international arenas, skilfully extracting the maximum returns from often unpromising circumstances" (George 2003, 17). Hafiz had always pursued control over Syria's direct neighbours, formerly "Greater Syria". Even when he didn't succeed he had been efficient in obstructing the plans of others in that regard.

He also pursued relations with the Gulf countries, for economic aid reasons. Likewise good relations with Egypt, the largest and most populated country in the region, were sought since 1989. Even though these relations were severed by Damascus for 10 years after Anwar el Sadat signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Hafiz el-Assad even pursued friendly relations with Iran after the Islamic revolution in 1979, which was based on their common hatred towards Israel and the West (George 2003, 18).

The Arab Israeli conflict was the main concern of Hafiz el-Assad, which he tried to control through his regional policies. Under his regime's rule, he developed the idea that Syria is responsible for maintaining the balance of power against Israeli supremacy in the Levant. Smaller Arab countries like Lebanon and Palestine were better off accepting Syrian guidance in the Israeli conflict and peace process.

Hafiz's regional ties with bigger Arab countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia guaranteed Syria a 'political-strategic depth' in order not be secluded because of its role in the conflict. Thus Syria enjoyed the foreign aid and investment of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The three countries Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt coordinated their policies to a certain extent through the 1990s in order to control the Arab League (Perthes 2001, 37).

As for Syrian foreign policy on the international level, Hafiz el-Assad based his relations with the West on his interest in the Middle East. Until the end of 1980 Syria enjoyed a progressive relationship with the Soviet Union with a purpose of opposing the West's indefinite support for Israel. This relationship included receiving several Soviet military and civilian experts, and signing in 1987 the Treaty of friendship and cooperation. However, Hafiz never allowed Soviet bases on Syrian soils and always kept relations open with the US. His foreign policy decisions were "based on a realistic analysis of the world Syria faced, and were typified by pragmatism and relative moderation" (Zisser 2007, 10).

This policy was best reflected with Hafiz's reaction after the collapse of the Soviet Union, where he responded by elevating his relationship with the

United States even though he realized that it wouldn't be very useful because of Washington's strong support for Israel. Similarly, Hafiz improved his relation with the European Union because he realized that it would be a fairer moderator than the U.S. in the Arab-Israeli conflict. As a further step towards that end Damascus became part of the Barcelona Process in 1995, which had economic and political cooperation between the European and the Mediterranean countries (George 2003, 18).

Hafiz's intended to improve relations with the United States through joining the U.S. led coalition in the Gulf war in 1990. Another part is his joining the Middle East peace process showing, for the first time in 1991, his willingness to sign a peace agreement with Israel. At the same time Hafiz still maintained good relations with Iran, also renewed his relations with Iraq (Zisser 2007, 13).

Hafiz el-Assad had expertly sought a delicate foreign policy that lead to making Syria a central player in the regional affairs. He controlled Lebanon and the Palestinian factions; he pressured Israel through Hizbullah without engaging in any military struggle in the Golan. He had close relations with the Soviet Union and still sustained connections with the U.S. who recognized Syria as a crucial player in the region.

That Syria backed the Maronite community against the Moslem-Palestinian alliance in Lebanon, Tehran against Baghdad and dissident Palestinians against Yasser Arafat's PLO while retaining pan-Arab credentials is, if nothing else, a tribute to Hafiz el-Assad's remarkable tactical skills. (ICG 2004)

However, looking at Bashar's foreign policy and comparing it to Hafiz's one cannot but realize that it hasn't always been a continuation of the latter's policies.

Bashar's foreign policy choices are best explained as reactions to his geopolitical context of the region. This is an important angle to look at since Bashar is not deviating from his father's foreign policy, but rather responding to new geopolitical challenges.

Bashar has taken two new paths in his foreign policy decision making. On one hand, he has maintained the same relations with countries like Iran and Israel. While on the other hand, he has taken totally new measures in his relation with countries like Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. This is explained by the geopolitical changes or status quo in the region. Based on this, the argument is that the geopolitical context drives Bashar to either alter his father's foreign policy or maintain them. It is very important to take into consideration the change of the Middle Eastern players and political environment between Bashar el-Assad's time and that of Hafiz el- Assad's. New political and even geo-political changes have happened in the region and especially in the last 10 years. The two foreign policies will be assessed in this regards.

## **2.5 – Conclusion**

This chapter argues that realism best explains both Hafiz and Bashar el-Assad's foreign policy. By examining the cases of Iran, Turkey, and Israel in the next chapter, this thesis will reveal how Bashar el-Assad was able to maintain Hafiz's foreign policy towards these countries because of the unchanging regional status quo after his inheritance of the presidency. Moreover, by maintaining this policy Bashar managed to keep Syria as a central player in the region as his father had planned and achieved. Factors like balance of power, regime security are behind Syrian foreign policy choices.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE REALIST SCHOOL IN SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY**

#### **3.1 - Introduction**

President Hafiz el-Assad formulated three different foreign policy strategies based on the type of relationship he wanted to create with the opposing country. The “diplomacy of power” which he applied to the Palestinian and Lebanese oppositions, the “pacifying diplomacy” when he allied with the West in the second Gulf War, as well as when he put an end to the Turkish crisis with the Adana agreement in 1998, and the “edge diplomacy” by allying with Iran in the first Gulf War (Fayad 2000, 126).

The strategic planning of Syrian Foreign policy since its independence is based on liberating the Arab occupied territories, regaining the rights of the Palestinian people, and assuring Arab cooperation to achieve these goals. Syrian diplomatic efforts were initiated based on its key understanding of its role in the region by acting as a balancing power between the regional and international players. By trying to maintain good relations with its regional neighbours, Syria strived on its cooperative policy with other Arab states. Also, Syria has dwelt on keeping cooperation channels open with other international states such as Latin American countries, US, Russia, India, and China, and especially Iran and Turkey in order to make sure they are not secluded as an international player (Ammoura 2010, 2).

Hafiz’s plan was to empower the rest of the Arab world with Iraq and Iran both as important strategic players. However, Saddam Hussein failed to adhere to this plan with when he waged war on Iran and his invaded of Kuwait (Ammoura 2010, 3).

This chapter will discuss how Bashar el-Assad has maintained his father's strategy in his relation with three countries Iran, Turkey and Israel. His strategy was born out of his need to sustain Syria's strategically powerful position in the Middle East and as a part of the strategy to balance the power of Israel in the region.

### **3.2 - The Strategic Partnership with Iran**

Bashar el-Assad has on several occasions expressed how important it is for Damascus to keep a strong relation with Tehran as part of Syria's regional plan to strengthen its role as a key player in the region. In an interview with Charlie Rose on May 26<sup>th</sup> 2010, Bashar el-Assad stated the following:

“Normally you should have good relations with your neighbors, something we've learned from our experience during the last decades. We've been in conflict, Syria and Turkey, Iraq and Turkey, and other countries. What did we get? Nothing. We've been losing for decades. We have learned here in the last decade that we have to turn the tide, so everybody is going for good relations with the other, even if he doesn't have the same vision or they—even if they disagree about most of the things, not some things. So, this relation, Syria/Iraq, we are neighbors. Syria/Turkey, we are neighbors. We'll affect each other directly. Iran is not my neighbor, but at the end, Iran is one of the big countries in the Middle East, and it's an important country, and it plays a role and affects different issues in the region. So, if you want to play a role and help yourself and save your interests, you should have good relations with all these influential countries. That's why this relation, I think, is very normal.”  
(www.charlierose.com)

The Syrian-Iranian alliance is probably one of the most durable alliances in the region. After overthrowing the Iranian monarchy in 1979, the secular Arab nationalist Syria and the Islamic Iran formed close relations that led to a formal alliance which has lasted to this day. This alliance was due to direct threats from Iraq, Israel and the US from the 1980s onward (Goodarzi 2006, 2).

Even though Syria and Iran have no common ideological beliefs; nevertheless, they are uniting their efforts to achieving influence over the region. According to many

experts on Middle Eastern relations, the Syrian- Iranian partnerships results from their geopolitical reality. It has been quoted as “ a marriage of convenience” though in earlier times it was believed to be an opportunistic alliance against the threat of Iraq. Ilan Berman was among those who considered that both Syria and Iran have a common goal, which is not to be the next Iraq (Goodarzi 2006, 3).

This strategic partnership started with Hafiz el-Assad during 1970s and reached its climaxed when Syria sided with Iran in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s resulting in a wider fracture between Saddam’s and el-Assad’s Baathism. However, in the 1990s this partnership weakened when each country was pursuing its own interest. Syria was immensely involved in the Middle East peace process and in regaining the Golan Heights while in the meantime Iran had an alternative strategy in approaching the matter. Their relationship was idyllic until the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 which led them to sign a joint defence agreement.

Iran sends millions of dollars in donations to Damascus every year, and it supported Syria against the international boycott after the Hariri Assassination in 2005. Syria and Iran see themselves as partners against Israel, US and Iraq; the opposition against them is what unifies them. “They have diverging interests when things are good in the region but when things deteriorate; they have obvious reasons to come together.” (Pan 2006, 15)

The relationship between Syria and Iran has had a great impact on both their foreign policies and on the Middle East. Some of these decisions included the 1982 Iran-Iraq war where Syria closed down the pipeline preventing it from reaching the Mediterranean. This played a major role in re-balancing the war outcome in favour of the Iranians causing the Iraqi great financial grievances.

Another important Syrian support backup of Iran's interest which led to a deterioration of the Jordanian-Syrian relations was the support of Jordan to Iraq in the 1980s. Syria's stand has cost her the stalemate her stand has created with its neighbouring country Jordan. This also contributed in almost freezing the Arab-Israeli peace process. Third, the fact that Syria overcame Arab and specifically Saudi-Arabia's pressure against its partnership with Iran, has increased Syria's weight in its role in the region. Fourth, Syria's support for Iran's activities in Lebanon is against Israeli, French and American interests, thus has shaped the former's relation with these three countries accordingly. Finally, Syria's continued support for Iran in spite of the bad relations between Moscow and Tehran has proved that Syria can proceed with its regional politics without the Russia (Hirschfeld 1986, 105).

Until the early 1980s, the relationship between Iran and Syria had a different weight for each respective country. For Iran, their relationship with Syria had a strategic importance though they had to keep their foreign policies in check as not to disrupt conflict of interest with Syria. As for Syria at the time, they saw an interest in this alliance since it had fruitful outcomes in the future. They wanted to map out future gains from the alliance in order to keep the balance of power in the region in check. (Hirschfeld 1986, 106).

This became evident when Iran used Syrian military and diplomatic support after the Iranian militants' hold of the US embassy in Tehran which led to deterioration in US-Iranian relations. Also after Saddam's invasion of Iran, Syrian efforts helped Tehran out of a regional isolation and Arab unity against it. However, the balance shifted to the other side when Syria needed Iranian assistance in 1982 to mobilize Shiites in Lebanon against Israeli forces.

After the cessation of hostilities with Israeli troops in 1985, it was Damascus' turn again in backing Iran against its regional isolation due to its war with Iraq until 1988 (Goodarzi 2006, 5). This relation went through turmoil in 1988 when Iran supported Hizbullah in its battle against the pro-Syria Amal movement Lebanon. This interference was limited and after negotiations between Tehran and Damascus, the fighting ended. Furthermore, Syria took a pacifying stand with Hizbullah to conserve the latter's support for its future strategy in Lebanon and reinforce its relation with Iran to deter its regional enemies (Goodarzi 2006, 227).

Syrian-Iranian relations remained strong throughout the 1990s and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and culminating it in an agreement signed by both the defence ministers of both countries in June 2006. The agreement was aimed against the 'common threats' Israel and the United States. After the conference, Iranian defence minister said that Iran "considers Syria's security its own security, and we consider our defence capabilities to be those of Syria" (Pouladi 2006).

Iran has also emphasized its support to Hizbullah by visiting Syria after the former's attack and kidnapping of Israeli soldiers in July 2006. Noting that Hizbullah receives 100\$ million per year from Tehran, as well as weapons are sent through Syria into the Lebanese borders (Pan 2006).

Despite Iran's support for Syria, yet it did not realign with Iraq during the American campaign for the War in 2003 as its partner, Syria, did. Observers predicted that the Iranian republic was planning to support the US in its quest of overthrowing Saddam Hussein same as it did in the war on Taliban in Afghanistan. To that end Tehran received a KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) delegation in September 2002

and arranged a meeting for them with the Supreme Council for the Islamic revolution in Iraq to manage imminent plans in Iraq.

Later in December of the same year, in a conference organised in London Jalal Talibani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, stated that “Iran is a great neighbour which has always supported the Iraqi opposition, and some sort of understanding between Iran and the United states, direct or indirect, would be a great help in the liberation of Iraq” (Muir 2002).

Syria strategic alliance with Iraq was strengthened rather than weaken after the Bush administration launched its war on Iraq in April 2003. Despite the fact that Syria backed Iran and Turkey on that matter, and it suspected that Iran coordinated with the United States its policy towards Iraq. Furthermore, the relations between Syria and Hizbullah, Iran’s ally in Lebanon strengthened greatly following the U.S. operation in Iraq (Lawson 2007, 38).

Syria has been accused of cooperating with Iran on its nuclear program. In June 2008, the British *Guardian* wrote that “the Iranians were involved in the Syrian program. The idea was that the Syrians produce plutonium and the Iranians get their share; eventhough Syria had no reprocessing facility for the spent fuel” (Farrar-Wellman and Frasco 2010).

Syria and Iran both negated these accusations however an Israeli air strike destroyed the facility before International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) could verify the accusations. Israel accused Syria of assisting Iran avert attention from its nuclear program by spreading rumours of war with Israel. Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon said he hopes that “Syria will not let itself get carried away by the bellicose statements of Iran” (Farrar-Wellman and Frasco 2010).

On another level Syria and Iran have emphasized their partnership in a joint press conference in February 2010, on Al Jazeera, after signing an agreement of cancelling the visa restrictions to each other's countries. Both Bashar el-Assad and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad defended their 30 year old strong ties by explaining that United States is not supposed to decide the relationships in the Middle East.

When asked about Hillary Clinton's comments about Washington's concern about Syria's relationship with Iran, he replied by: "We hope that others don't give us lessons about our region and our history, we are the ones who decide how matters will go and we know our interests. We thank them for their advice" (Al Jazeera 2010).

While Ahmadinejad called for the US to "pack up" and leave the Middle East, by saying: "(The Americans) want to dominate the region but they feel Iran and Syria are preventing that, we tell them that instead of interfering in the region's affairs, to pack their things and leave" (Al Jazeera 2010).

President el-Assad made it clear in this press conference that he won't change his long-term partnership with Iran when asked about Clinton's demand for Syria to move away from Iran. "We must have understood Clinton wrong because of bad translation or our limited understanding, so we signed the agreement to cancel the visas" he said (Al Jazeera 2010).

The relations of Syria and Iran are still growing stronger with time due to their common interest to balance out the United States' meddling in the affairs of the Middle East especially after 2003 invasion of Iraq. Both countries are always emphasizing their deep rooted foreign policy ties as they are facing the same hegemon. Their relationship which started with Hafiz el-Assad and survived the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian revolution and even the invasion of Iraq has proved to work for both sides. Iran has allied itself

with the Arab Syria as a means to win herself a strategic partner in the Arab world and revitalize their interests in the region especially since Syria is the connection between Hizbullah and Iran. Syria, on the other hand, has played their cards smart by finding a rather powerful ally in the region to support it economically due to its secluded position especially after the 2005 assassination of Rafic el Hariri. Syria down plays its foreign policy in the Middle East by having a more diplomatic approach towards the case of Iraq for example. Though, they had opposed the Iraqi invasion of 2003, yet they have cooperated with the Americans to rid them of Islamic insurgencies. Both countries have tried to seek to maximize their interests with all the key players in the region while trying to protect their strong alliance. Their marriage is based on mutual interest without the possibility of a conflict of interest and same-fate strategy. If opportunities arise for either any of the two countries, the other turns a blind eye as to not affect their mutual interests. Their foreign policy is more of protective policy of each other without eliminating one sided interests when the need arises.

### **3.3 - Maintaining the Friendship with Turkey**

Syrian-Turkish relations have always been characterized of relatively quiet but not absent of tensions. This is due to the presence of severe conflicts of interest between the two countries related to border issues, problems pertaining to water and river rights - Euphrates River waters, political orientation, religious stance, smuggling, drug-trafficking, and terrorism. The mere fact of border build-up and internal security forces on the Turkish side proves how serious these problems are. However, the two governments renounced obvious aggression, their relations developed closely in the 1980s in comparison to the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1987 to 1990 period Syria and



Turkey improved their cultural and economic ties but their attitude towards political affairs remained mixed (Pipes, 1989).

During the early 1950s Turkey adopted a pro-Western position and tried to enrol Syria in a Western oriented regional alliance. By the mid-1950s relations between the two states deteriorated because Syria adopted a pro-Arab regional policy firmly backed by the Soviet Union, thus enhancing the difference in foreign policy orientation with Western Turkey. However, the trend of minimizing the differences start with Turkey in the 1960s when it decided to stop it's offensive and enforcing attitude towards neighbouring countries and adopted a policy of "rapprochement and reconciliation" instead. In the 1970s Syria started responding to Turkey's attitude and found it beneficial to assume a cooperative attitude with its neighbour as well (Yaniv 1986, 99).

Turkish-Syrian relation changed due to in international politics. The collapse of the Cold War blocs eliminated an important cause of the friction between the two states leading to normal ties between them. The Turkish-Syrian conflict had more than regional aspect to it, there was a superpower aspect. As well as the relation between Ankara and Damascus was a confrontation between two alliances; the Syrian-Soviet and the Turkish-American (Yarvin 1989, 100).

The Syrian government was resolutely anti-American. It played an active role to obstruct US efforts in the Arab-Israeli conflict until it cooperated with the US in the Kuwaiti crisis in 1990. Also Turkey is Russia's long-lasting foe, it is US's formal ally and a member of NATO. Whenever Syria performed an action against Turkey, it was within the Russian umbrella and at the convenience of Moscow. When Turkey acted in an offensive way towards Syria, it would be under American patronage and to

demonstrate to the US that it is a strong ally capable of handling its own security (Pipes, 1989).

However, the turning point in Syrian-Turkish relations was in October 1998. At that time it was very probable for the two countries to engage in an armed conflict when Turkey suspected that Syria was harbouring Kurdish rebels against the Turkish regime. Then Turkey deployed around 10,000 troops along the Syrian border and its chief of general staff declared that “the current situation is that of an undeclared war”. However this was deterred by President Hafiz el-Assad declaring that it was still keen on good relations with Turkey (Lawson 1998, 180).

Both countries signed the Adana agreement on October 20<sup>th</sup> 1998 in which Syria agreed on; recognizing the PKK as a terrorist organization, ceasing to allow its activities on its territory as well as establishing training camps, also preventing PKK members from using Syria for travel outside. Syria also agreed on preventing PKK leaders from entering Syrian territories.

Thus Syria’s responded to the Turkish aggression by deporting Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK’s leader, from Damascus and to ban Kurdish militants from penetrating the country by incorporating a better surveillance system. This was followed by shutting down PKK “training facilities” in Syria and Lebanon by 1999. Ankara and Damascus created a joint Security Committee including high ranking army officers from both sides in charge of solving tactical and strategic disputes. Along the same lines, Turkey encouraged Syria to send an economic commission to examine prospects of commercial and industrial collaboration. By mid-March 1999, Syria had sent its deputy prime minister for economic affairs to follow up on that matter, which was concluded with an announcement stating that “the two countries will exert all possible

efforts to raise and diversify bilateral trade, they agreed to exchange visits by mercantile and economic delegation to review the potential of establishing a private council for businessmen in both countries” (Lawson 1998, 182).

With Bashar el-Assad assuming the presidency in Syria in June 2000, relations between the two countries assumed new levels. Several steps between the two countries were taken in an attempt to revitalize the relations between the two countries. A meeting between the Governor of Aleppo and a Turkish commission took place to found the formal discussion between the two countries. Within a few months, Turkey started to increase its trade with the Syrian government (Lawson 1998, 183).

Turkey sent Minister of Economy Recep Onal leading a delegation of one hundred Turkish businessmen to reinitiate the joint Economic Commission in May 2000. By November the foreign Ministers of both Syria and Turkey met in Doha to finalize a “memorandum of understanding” that was supposed to bring the two countries together. Furthermore, in January 2001, Syrian military officers met with Turkish officers in Ankara to further stabilize the relations between the two. In March same year, the Minister of electricity of Syria declared that there will be integration of Syria’s Electrical grid with that of Turkey’s and Lebanon. By September that year, the Ministers of Interior signed a common security agreement. According to this agreement the two governments will fight terrorism, organized crime, smuggling, drug trade, and illegal immigration, together (Lawson 2007, 35).

In 2002, General Hassan el Turkmani Syria’s Chief of Staff, met with his Turkish counterpart in Ankara to initiate an agreement of better collaboration regarding military manufacturing. Other agreements created better bilateral trade and investment. This collaboration climaxed with dialogues between Turkey’s Prime Minister Abdullah

Gül and President Bashar el-Assad in Damascus in January 2003. These discussions led to signing a “crisis management pact” regarding war on Iraq. Turkey and Syria later organized a regional conference in Istanbul to sponsor foreign policy collaboration between six states to face US allegations of military attacks on Iraq (Lawson 2007, 36).

The leadership change from Hafiz el-Assad to his son, Bashar resulted in an improved relation with Turkey mainly because of Bashar’s more open domestic policy. This led to a redefining of the Turkish-Syrian relations with a dismissal of their cultural difference resulting in expanded bilateral agreements (Altuniski and Tur 2006, 218).

Bashar’s regional strategy to improve Syria’s relations with its neighbouring countries included better relations with Turkey. In return, Turkey was very enthusiastic about this new-born cooperative stand with Syria mainly shown through the mutual official visits. Bashar’s first visit of the Turkish capital happened in 2004 which marked the first visit of any Syrian President to Ankara in modern times. (Altuniski and Tur 2006, 226)

Turkey’s interest from these events rested mainly in newly gained security. “Also, having good relations with Syria was in line with the Ecevit government’s “regionally based foreign policy”, which argued that Turkey should develop good relations in all regions independent of its ties with the West”. Thus, improved relations with Damascus had a great effect on Ankara’s relations with the Arab countries and empowered Turkey’s influence in the Middle East. Moreover, this was accompanied by Turkey’s interest of having economic ties with Syria (Altuniski and Tur 2006, 227).

In the aftermath of the Iraq war in 2003, a common concern between the two countries emerged; this was the establishment of a Kurdish state. This fear on the Syrian part is due to the Kurdish community amounting to 9% of the Syrian population. This

fear was further emphasized by the riots in March 2005 within the Kurdish areas. Also on the Turkish part, the idea of the creation of a Kurdish state in north Iraq is of great concern. The increase of violence with the PKK after the stop of the ceasefire with the PKK in 2004 made it already a sensitive case for Turkey (Altuniski and Tur 2006, 229).

During Bashar's visit to Turkey in July 2005, he expressed in an interview with Middle East News Agency that there are "common views and threats perceptions within Syria and Turkey in relation to Iraq." He also agreed with the Turkish statement that the establishment of a Kurdish state is intolerable and is a "red-line" for Turkey. He expressed that "a Kurdish state would violate our red line too" (Altuniski and Tur 2006, 229).

In December 2009, the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council held a meeting in Damascus which Recep Tayyip Erdogan attended. During this meeting Syria and Turkey signed 51 agreements, memos of understanding and work programs on cooperation between the two countries in all areas (Turkish Weekly, Oct 2010).

Syria's rapprochement of Turkey was meant to solace threats from Israel. In July 2006 the chief foreign policy adviser of Erdogan paid a visit to Damascus to boost President Assad's constructive role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Also Turkey assured Damascus that it will not be part of any Israeli military campaign against Syria. With Turkey's adoption of an anti-American policy, Syria is empowering its ties with Ankara to end the isolation enforced on it by the US. On the other hand, Turkey sees in Syria its gate to the Middle East due to their common borders. Also, one of Turkey's most imminent concerns is the situation in Iraq, and the PKK using the Kurdish controlled areas in Iraq to pose a threat on Turkey. Syria's support on that matter is of great use to Turkey.

In an interview with *Al Nahar* in October 2010, President Bashar el-Assad commented on how Syria and Turkey had common interest in weakening the Kurds in Iraq:

“No... we are against all separatist forces in Iraq in any direction they take... we are against the fragmenting of Iraq... our main concern after the invasion is Iraq’s unity... it’s number one... Iraq’s unity and Arabism... all other issues are side issues or details,” stressing that if unity and Arabism aren’t resolved then nothing will be solved, noting that separatism exists in more than one party and not just Kurds. “We stood against all separatist thoughts through what we did, we and Turkey and Iran,” (*Al Nahar* Oct 10, 2010)

On October 2010, the Turkish weekly has published that both Bashar el-Assad and Erdogan are satisfied with the level of Turkish-Syrian relations. It notes that:

Presidents el-Assad and Erdogan expressed the readiness of Syria and Turkey to help in forming an Iraqi government capable of improving the internal situation, achieving national reconciliation and unity among all spectrums of the Iraqi people, and improves relations with neighbouring countries (*Turkish Weekly* October 12, 2010).

The improvements in bilateral relations between Ankara and Damascus include flourishing economic transactions, expanding governmental connections, and strengthened military and security cooperation. This improvement is the result of Syria’s acknowledgment that it cannot be at war with its powerful neighbour, especially with Turkey’s partnership with Israel. At the same time, when Turkey feels that it is too weak to make use of Syria’s concessions, Damascus has left itself open to Ankara economically and militarily (Lawson 1986, 199).

### **3.4 - Israel and Syria: Contending Neighbours?**

In his inaugural speech of June 2000, Basharel-Assad has stressed his father's position regarding the peace agreement with Israel, and he stated his willingness to resume peace talks.

As far as we are concerned, we have stressed on many occasions that peace in our region will not be achieved until we restore our occupied land; and that many of the problems that have appeared recently find their solution in providing the opportunities for just peace, which removes the causes of tension, conflict, frustration and disappointment.

We stress that we are prepared for negotiations without any preconditions in accordance with the Madrid terms of reference. In other words, we resume from the point we stopped at in the early 1990s (syria-alassad.org 2005).

The Arab- Israeli conflict is the enduring struggle in Syria's foreign policy. Since Israel occupied the Golan Heights in 1967, Syria's main aim is to retrieve those occupied territories. On his part, Hafiz el-Assad has always believed that negotiations combined with great military power and Arab unity are the best tool in the struggle with Israel (Korany and Dessouki 1991, 379).

Though after the 1973 war, Hafiz tried to negotiate a peaceful agreement with Israel under the patronage of the United States, these negotiations failed. The failure of mediation convinced Hafiz that he cannot undertake this track without a military and political equilibrium with their rival Israel. Thus he obstructed any American attempt on this matter based on Israel's terms. Hafiz el-Assad believed that the Arabs had the time before reaching a peace agreement with Israel since modernization only makes the Arabs stronger, meanwhile the Arab states should maintain their military struggle. Israel as well is not keen to attain peace with Syria since the latter is incapable of hindering Israel's on-going quest in the region. Both countries were managing a "deterrence relationship" since they both knew they had "more to lose than to gain by resort to war" (Korany and Dessouki 1991, 380).

Hafiz el-Assad assumed a two-track strategy after the 1973 war; on the one hand exhausting his military option and on the other hand the use of diplomacy in regaining the Golan Heights and other Arab occupied territories, plus achieving the national rights of the Palestinians. El-Assad had gone through improving its relation with Washington especially 1988, during which the US emerged as the only superpower after the defeat of the Soviet Union. This rapprochement involved Syria opening to better relations with Israel by adopting UN resolutions 242 and 338 (peace in return for territories). Also by beginning 1989 Syria started mending relations with Egypt, the only Arab country who had signed a peace agreement with Israel. In July 1990 Hafiz visited Cairo for the first time in thirteen years, and argues that “We are ready to join the peace process and we accept UN resolutions 242 and 338 and we still call for a just and comprehensive peace”. However, all throughout these years Syrian leaders still portrayed, in their media, Israel as a “Neo-Nazi government” (Ma’oz 1995, 201-204).

Hafiz el-Assad has adopted this position all throughout his tenure, even with his participation in the Madrid conference on October 1991 where both countries were present along with the US, Soviet Union, Lebanon, a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation, Jordan and representatives from both UN and the European Community. During the Madrid conference Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq el Sharaa attacked Israel, refuted its legitimacy and reemphasized claiming the Golan Heights and Palestinian territories (Gaza strips, West Bank, and Arab Jerusalem). Conversely, Prime Minister Shamir showed a more positive stance towards “peace with the Arab states” and did not dismiss the possibility of Israeli withdrawal from 1967 territories. This was followed by positive bilateral talks in Washington between Syria and Israel in 1992. These talks continued through 1993, 1994 and 1995 but an advance towards peace did not take



place, even with the signing of Oslo accord between PLO and Israel (Ma'oz 1995, 215-216-236).

In December 1999 bilateral peace talks between Israel and Syria were resumed under the auspice of President Bill Clinton and in the presence of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister el Sharaa. These talks opened in Washington and continued in Shepherdstown, Virginia, were doomed to fail because Barak refused to sign on the commitment of withdrawal to the 1967 line. The end of the Israeli-Syrian talks were declared in Israel and the US after the unsuccessful Geneva summit between president Clinton and president Hafiz el-Assad also because Hafiz al-Assad didn't accept anything less than the full withdrawal to the 1967 lines (Zisser 2007, 148).

With Bashar el-Assad assumption of the presidency there were voices of hope in Israel regarding the renewal of Syrian-Israeli peace talks. Bashar was viewed as young and modern, unlike his father who was perceived as an obstacle to peace because of his personality and his identification with the past wars. Yet, Bashar's inauguration was followed shortly by the second Intifada in October 2000 and renewed military activities by Hizbullah against Israel. Following these outbreaks in the region President Bashar el-Assad took a firm stance against Israel to affirm himself as the leader of the "Arab rejectionist camp" (Zisser 2007, 150).

During the al Aqsa intifada, Bashar withheld from directly confronting Israel but at the same time he continuously attacked the Israeli government. He had understood that, because of the intifada and after September 11 and the war on Iraq, Israel has gained a closer proximity of its American presence due to their military bases in Iraq. Israel now had the chance to retaliate to any military act against its population and it strived to seek its legitimacy with a greater thrust. At the Arab leaders' summit on

October 2000 which was held to discuss helping the Palestinians in their struggle, Bashar el-Assad explicitly stated that it was not in the Arabs best interest to have an overall Arab confrontation with Israel (Zisser 2007, 154).

Similarly to Western, Israel did not expect President Bashar to have his father's firm stand towards Israel, at the time they did not expect to have serious peace talks with Syria in 2008 orchestrated by Turkey. These talks restarted long-stopped negotiations between Syria and Israel since the Shepherdstown talks in early 2000. Even though several things had changed by that time, Syria's peace precondition remained the withdrawal of Israel to the pre-1967 war land, which includes the Golan Heights and territories of the Jordan River Valley (Hof 2009, 1).

The 2008 peace talks were preceded by several failed attempts in peace initiatives, like the Saudi-sponsored one in 2002. The Saudi Peace plan was presented at the Arab summit in Beirut in March 2002. It declared a desire of the entire Arab world to put an end to the Arab-Israeli struggle. This plan included the withdrawals of Israel to the 1967 border and a Palestinian state would be created in Gaza and the West Bank along with a 'just solution' for the Palestinian refugees' problem. In turn, this would be accompanied by an Arab recognition of the Israeli state. This plan resulted in the Arab summit in Riyadh in 2007 (BBC 2007).

In December 2002, *Al Hayat* newspaper published Bashar's statement in response to Bush after a meeting with British scholars:

I have a message for the Israelis. We are interested in Peace. The Israelis must choose between a candidate interested in peace and another who wants war...The Arab peace plan is clear. It proposes peace and normal relations to Israel on conditions that it withdraws to the 1967 border (*Al Hayat* 2002).

Then in December 2003, in an interview with *The New York Times*, President Bashar el-Assad stated that he wants to resume the peace negotiations and to establish normal relations with Israel. This announcement was seen as a sign of a renewed initiative from his part because of new worries and created an Israeli debate of how to respond because there were speculations about Bashar's motives. However Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, Head of military intelligence, as well as several others in the Defence field maintained that Israel should respond positively to this proposal in case Bashar el-Assad was honest. But Prime Minister Sharon remained doubtful of the prospects of Bashar's seriousness (ICG 2004,10).

Israel's response to Bashar's statement was unexplainable because there was no radical change in his position. He was ready to make peace if Israel would give up the Golan Heights but he did not expect Israel to accept his proposal. Ariel Sharon was not enthusiastic about restarting the peace talks, as Eyal Zisser noted, "He was unprepared to pay the price of the Golan Heights for peace with Syria" (Zisser 2007, 167).

In that regard, *Ma'ariv* newspaper wrote on 6 January 2004 that along with Bashar's will to start the peace talks with Israel, he is still arming Hizbullah. He used the airplanes Syria sent to transport provisions to the earthquake victims in Tehran to bring back weapons for Hizbullah (Ma'ariv 2004).

The initiation of the peace talks in Ankara came after the emphasis of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in April 2007 that Israel is interested in peace with Syria. However the latter was still considered as a part of the Axis of Evil (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea) and a state that backs terrorism in the region, as published by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2008. Thus to be able to engage in peace negotiations Syria has to stop its support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad organizations. It should cease

from ensuring weapons to Hizbullah which destabilizes south Lebanon. Also Olmert required Syria to end its “support for terror” in Iraq and renounce its ties with Iran (MFA 2008).

Nevertheless, Peace talks were started in 2008 in Ankara during which both parties stated to NBC News that “they have declared their intent to conduct these talks in good faith and with an open mind”, with a goal of reaching “a comprehensive peace”. But when asking Washington about their stand from these talks, White House Press Secretary Dana Perino said “We do not object to this... We'll see how this progresses” (NBC News 2008).

Even though, Syria and Israel have tried to hold bilateral peace talks without US arbitration, yet they cannot and will not reach any peace agreement without US help. What interests the US in the Middle East is a progress in the Arab-Israeli, a more stable situation in Lebanon with a weaker Hizbullah, as well as the containment Jihadi Movement, a more stable Iraq and a weaker Iran and a better Arab public perception of the US in the region. The US knows that Syria affects all the previous listed issues and a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement is a positive step towards reaching them (Salem 2009, 69).

The U.S. would be perceived as a player of peace and stability in the region if it were to cater for an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement. However, one argument voiced out against American efforts for a peace between Syria and Israel is that Syria is not serious about peace and any settlement would mean rewarding Syria for “bad behaviour”. This argument has no grounds, because Syria has revealed its readiness for “peace-for-land” since 1991 (Salem 2009, 71).

All the attempts for a Syrian-Israeli peace so far have failed even though these have come so close at several points in history, whether during Hafiz or Bashar tenures. Both have been open to the peace talks and the precondition remained the same between the two; land for peace.

### **3.4 - Conclusion**

The chapter has shown that Bashar el-Assad has moved forward with the same foreign policy as his father. When he first came to power, Bashar himself stated in interview with *Al Safir* on 30 December, 2000, that he is the same as his father.

Whoever thought that I would be more moderate than my father erred. The Americans think that our political behaviour is pragmatic, but in practice my generation, including myself, show an even greater adherence to national and pan-Arab principles than did my father's generation (Al Safir 2000).

Bashar best displayed adherence to his father's footsteps in conducting Syria's foreign policy. He has maintained the strategic partnership with Iran despite all the obstacles it has faced, whether from pressure from the West and especially from the United States and Israel to end this partnership. He has built on the newly created rapprochement by his father with Turkey, and worked greatly on being "a good neighbour" to the extent that Turkey eventually hosted Syrian-Israeli peace talks after a long history. Finally, Bashar has played his foreign policy cards towards Israel and the peace talks the way his father did.

This foreign policy realism which started with his father and mainly believes in a strong Syria and a strong relationship with the Arab states is at the heart of Bashar's foreign-policy decision making. A strong Syria can balance Israeli power in the region.

A strong Syria, Bashar believes, can also reach peace based on its own terms rather than terms imposed on it.

The next chapter examines the changes Bashar has made to his foreign policy due to new geopolitical challenges. Lebanon and Iraq are the best arenas of such challenges. A discussion of Bashar's policies in these arenas underscores the different challenges he faced in them and the way he handled these challenges in a way not to compromise his status as the head of Syria, also not to compromise Syria's status as a key player in the region.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **BASHAR EL-ASSAD'S GEOPOLITICAL BATTLES**

#### **4.1 – Introduction**

After the September 11, 2001 attacks the US changed its foreign policy and made combating terrorism its main focus. It adopted an aggressive policy to retaliate to these attacks, from the war on Afghanistan to the war on Iraq, to its policy against Iranian nuclear power. The United States government perceives Syria as a key player in the region with close ties to “terrorist countries” like Iran and supporting “terrorist groups” like Hizbullah and Hamas.

The American administration started exerting pressure on Syria in hope that it will cave in and relinquish its “anti-Western” foreign policy. These pressures culminated after the war on Iraq. The U.S. claimed that Syria deliberately opened its borders and allowed Islamic terrorist to cross into Iraq. This was followed by the Syria Accountability Act. It tried to pressure Syria to end its presence in Lebanon and to stop its alleged development of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

This chapter examines how Bashar el-Assad reacted to these pressures, and how he had to change his father’s policy towards Iraq and Lebanon because of the new challenges Syria faced. This chapter will also examine how these changes have affected the position of Syria as a key player in the region.

#### **4.2 - Syria and Lebanon before Bashar**

Syria entered Lebanon in 1976, however its interest in controlling its “southern backyard” dates even before that year. Since the eruption of the civil war in Lebanon in 1975, between Kamal Jumblat’s Lebanese National Movement and the PLO on the one

hand, and the conservative Christian front on the other, Hafiz el-Assad was playing the mediator between the two fronts. However at the same time he backed the Lebanese National Movement and the PLO by supplying them with weapons which weakened the Lebanese state and eventually invited Syrian's intervention. By April 1976 Syrian troops had entered Lebanon to prevent a Christian defeat and bring about stability to the country. This was the perfect excuse to deploy armed forces in Lebanon and gain control over the country (Deeb 2003, 11-18).

The signing of the Golan Heights disengagement agreement in May 1974 leading to a cease fire on the Syrian-Israeli border and the recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people on October 1974 drove Hafiz el-Assad to control the PLO, Jordan, and Lebanon, the parties involved in the conflict with Israel. To gain that control he intervened militarily in Lebanon. However, he intervened on the Christian front's side in order not to end up with a radical side in control of Lebanon. His plan was to gain full control over Lebanon in order to prevent it from signing a peace agreement with Israel and to fight the latter in Lebanese territories (Deeb 2003, 37).

Controlling Lebanon was Hafiz's strategic decision, especially that Syria considered Lebanon to be part of Greater Syria and its eastern backyard. In his speech on 20 July 1976, the Syrian president explained why he decided to intervene militarily in Lebanon. For him the defeat of the Christian front would have led to an Israeli intervention in Lebanon, which will weaken Syria's western border and increase its regional isolation. On the other hand a Christian defeat would turn the conflict into an international dispute which would have led to the partition of Lebanon and the establishment of a pro-Israeli Christian state. Moreover, the defeat of the Christian front



and the creation of an entity by the National Movement of Lebanon and the PLO with links to Iraq and Libya would lead Syria to an unwanted conflict with Israel (Salloukh 2005, 15).

In an interview with *Al Ra'y el-Am* a Kuwaiti newspaper in 1976, Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam stated that,

Any attempt to partition Lebanon by any group or community would mean immediate Syrian intervention, for Lebanon was part of Syria and we shall take it back if there is any real attempt of partition. It must be clear that this does not mean only the four provinces and the coastal areas, but also Mount Lebanon. Either Lebanon remains united or it has to be incorporated in Syria (Deeb 2003, 13).

The Syrian intervention in Lebanon was orchestrated by Henry Kissinger in order to allow neutralizing Syrian opposition to an Egyptian-Israeli second disengagement agreement in Sinai. This was through secret negotiations between Syria and Israel to sign the “red line agreement” which identifies the maximum Lebanese territories Syrian troops can be present in and the number of Syrian soldiers allowed. Kissinger managed this fact by “exaggerating Israel’s desire to intervene in Lebanon to save the Christian Lebanese from total defeat” (Salloukh 2005, 15-16).

Throughout the 1980s Syria and Israel waged a regional struggle over Lebanese territories to control Lebanon. Israel wanted to weaken Syria’s presence in Lebanon which would hinder its regional security and the regime’s internal security. In March 1978, Israel established a “security zone” in the south and kept its presence there despite UN Security Council Resolution 425 that came out in the same month which calls for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanese territory (Salloukh 2005, 16).

By 1982 Israel had gained the upper hand in Beirut and insured the election of Pro-Israeli Bashir Gemayel as President, through whom Israel planned the establishment of a strong Maronite government and the signing of a peace treaty with

Israel. However in September of that year Syria organized the assassination of Gemayel, through which it had annulled a peace agreement signed between Israel and the Lebanese government. It also forced the Lebanese state to abrogate the May 17 agreement which was signed in 1983 between Amine Gemayel and Israel (Zisser 2007, 175)

By 1989 Hafiz el-Assad had the capability of ending the Lebanese civil war, restructuring its political system and its governmental institutions and reintroducing life to the country after being paralyzed for over a decade. However these accomplishments rendered him in full control over Lebanon from which he reaped economic profits through numerous Syrian investments in the country (Zisser 2007, 174).

In 1989 the Taif accord, the outcome of Saudi, Syrian and U.S. negotiation was forced on Lebanon and established Syria's control over Lebanon. The accord had established Syria as the external arbitrary army of the different parties and emphasized the "distinctive relations" between the two countries. It also underscored what was agreed upon in the 1943 National Charter, "Lebanon should never be a source of threat to Syria's security... Consequently Lebanon does not allow that it be made a corridor or a beachhead for any power or state or organization seeking to undermine its security or the security of Syria" (Salloukh 2005, 17).

The Taif accord was drafted in a way to provide a suitable yet unjustifiable balance between Lebanon's confessional groups (Sunni, Shiite, Christian and Druze). The patron of this Accord, Syria, was careful that it will insure its strategic goal in Lebanon regardless of the obvious shifts or uncertainties it had shown. "Put negatively, Syria has been concerned to prevent either a Maronite rightist takeover of Lebanon in alliance with Israel, or a radical (Lebanese/Palestinian nationalist) takeover threatening

both Israeli retaliation and the destabilization of Syria (Sayigh1994, 142). Syria sought to protect its security interests in order to balance with Israel's power in the region. Controlling the Lebanese-Syrian border with Israel was one of its main objectives (Usher 1997, 60).

Although the Taif accord mentioned that within two years Syria would redeploy its troops to the Bekaa Valey, Syria remained on Lebanese territories until 2005. Throughout the 1990s and until early 2000 Lebanon was a fruitful investment for Syria in two fields. Politically, since Lebanon tied itself to the Syrian track especially in its foreign policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, and economically because Syria benefited from many investments in Lebanon and in exporting Syrian workers to Lebanese territory (Zisser 2007, 177).

One cannot examine Syria's relation with Lebanon without discussing its relation with Hizbullah. Hizbullah is a card that Syria used and still uses in its regional and international foreign policy. Both Hafez and Bashar el-Assad used Hizbullah to pressure Israel on its Northern border. The strategy is to regain the Golan Heights without having to wage war against Israel. It was used even when Damascus was in peace talks with Israel.

Even when he was negotiating peace with Israel, Hafiz el-Assad used to play the "Hizbullah card" on the Lebanese Southern border. Attacks on Israeli soldiers by Hizbullah militants were used to put pressure on Israel. However, Syria and Hizbullah did not always have good relationships. Things changed after the end of the civil war and the Taif agreement. Before this time, there clearly was a competition between Syria, Iran, Hizbullah and Amal. There are a lot of reasons for this, Syria considered Amal its

greatest ally in Lebanon, and it resented Iran's attempt to create its own ally inside Lebanon.

Syria dominated Lebanon after the 1990s, paving the way to a new structural change inside the party of God, "Encouraged by both Syria and Iranian mentors, the Party of God dropped its earlier objections to participating in Lebanon's political system" (Jaber 1997, 72). There were many factors that led to a new Syrian-Hizbullah alliance. The death of Hafez Al-Asad paved the way to Hizbullah's Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah to form a new relation with his son Bashar. "Once Bashar assumed the presidency, Nasrallah demonstratively offered his patronage to the young leader" (Zisser 2007, 185). This relationship, however, is not strictly one sided. Bashar had also agreed to let religious figures deploy themselves in the Alawite Mountain. This breakthrough proved that Hizbullah was able to become a great ally for Bashar. As Zisser points out, "this step increased Bashar's dependence on Hizbullah." (Zisser 2007, 185)

One factor that commenced the relationship between Syria and Hizbullah is the use of the Syrian border in the export of the weapons to Hizbullah. Syria has turned a blind eye towards the arms smuggling because its motive is to use Hizbullah strategically in their war against Israel. The common objective between Syria and Hizbullah is their hostility against Israel and their common fight against Zionism. This goal has been the most important tie between the neighbouring country and the Lebanese military party, Hizbullah. As Bashar el-Assad mentioned frequently "Hizbullah is a Lebanese resistance organization, although we stand by it politically and morally." (Zisser 2007, 160)

Harik clearly states the motives behind Syria's interest in Hizbullah. According to Harik "Assad needed two assets: his own surrogate force that could provide the necessary disturbances and frictions that might keep the Golan issue alive; and some help with the logistics of the strategy he has in mind. As we shall see, Hizbullah and Iran provided these assets." (Harik 2007, 31) Therefore, we notice that the Syrian – Hizbullah factor consisted of a two way winning approach from both sides. Hizbullah is not Syria's tool to reach its objectives, both need each other. Syria needed Hizbullah as a strong resistance movement in Lebanon in order to reach its goals in the Israeli conflict, and Hizbullah needed Syria geographically to transfer its weaponry and as a strong ally in this region.

Things changed drastically in 2000. On the national level, 2000 marked the year when the Israeli forces evacuated from southern Lebanon and all the territories were restored except Shebaa and the Kfarshouba Heights, according to Hizbullah. This marked a very important cornerstone for both Hizbullah and the Lebanese in general. Even on this special national day, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah in his victory speech on May 26, 2000 mentions his two allies. "In addition to Lebanon, two states and two men have to be mentioned, and their roles acknowledged: the Islamic Republic of Iran, Assad's Syria; the leader Khomeini, and the great Arab leader, President Hafez al-Assad." (Noe 2007, 234) However, liberation did not lead to the disarmament of Hizbullah. Syria was still present on Lebanese soil, and it supported Hizbullah to protect itself and use it as its card in the Israeli conflict. All this would change with the 9/11 attacks.

#### **4.3 - Syria's 'Brotherly' Relations with Lebanon**

In his lecture in the Syrian Higher Military academy in 2010, Deputy Syrian Foreign Minister Abed el Fattah Ammoura discussed the international and regional repercussions of 9/11 on the entire region. In his discussion of Lebanon, Ammoura explained that on several occasions the Bush Administration tried to conspire against Syria believing that it can marginalize it from Middle East politics. The assassination of the late Rafik Hariri in February 2004 which was followed by several bombings in Lebanon led to Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. Ammoura pointed that Syria had already done four waves of redeployment from Lebanon before UN Security Council Resolution 1559, since President Bashar became President (Ammoura 2010, 10).

In June 2001, Syrian troops had started withdrawing from Beirut to continue a redeployment strategy that started in 2000. The strategy was to move from "political" to "defensive" positions. But this had stopped after the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The Israeli withdrawal disturbed Syria because it deprived it from its resistance card and its strategy to gain Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights without going to war against Israel. However, after the Israeli withdrawal, local condemnation of Syria's presence in Lebanon and involvement in Lebanese matters increased. Basharel-Assad stated that he would not relinquish his strategic position in Lebanon as long as Lebanese and Syrian territories were still occupied by Israel. This statement disproves the claim that he ordered the redeployment because of Lebanese pressures (Perthes 2001, 41).

By April 2005, all Syrian Army troops had withdrawn from Lebanon, thus putting an end to the Syrian military presence in Lebanon since 1976. In a speech given by president Bashar to the Syrian People's Assembly on 3 March 2005, he argued that the withdrawal is a continuation of the strategy towards Lebanon Syria had started since

he arrived to Presidency. In reality, however, this move was due to international and regional pressure on Syria to abandon Lebanon and preserve the regime (Zisser 2007, 172).

In his speech before the People's Assembly on 3 March 2005, Bashar el-Assad explained what his view on UNSCR 1559 regarding Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon:

A final point, withdrawal does not harm Syria's interests. On the contrary, it strengthens Syria's interests. That is why we started withdrawing five years ago. We have withdrawn over 64 per cent of the forces; and this is something even many Syrians don't know...You know we carried out four withdrawals before 1559 was passed. The fifth withdrawal was last September. The main thing is that these withdrawals ensured stability in Lebanon. That is why we told them that we don't have a problem with 1559; and we don't think it is against our interests. It is about withdrawal, and the Taif Accord, to which Syria is committed and has always supported, provides for withdrawal. Thus, we don't have a problem with the United Nations regarding 1559. So, in principle we don't have any problem. The important thing is the mechanism. The difference between 1559 and Taif Accord is that the Taif Accord has a mechanism while 1559 does not provide for a mechanism. They only said withdrawal and every state in the world is interpreting it as it wishes (syria-alassad.org 2005).

Nevertheless, Syrian President made it seem as if it was his decision to pull out of Lebanon, Syria's withdrawal was unexpected and humiliating. It weakened Syria's regional security interests and made it vulnerable to international pressure. It was sudden to the Syrians as well as to their Lebanese allies. Within one month all Syrian troops returned to their country. Even Syrian intelligence in Lebanon was weakened (Salloukh 2005, 14).

Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon was rooted in a number of mistakes. The most important is the extension of Emile Lahoud's presidency by a decision from Damascus in 2004. This decision provoked UN Security Council Resolution 1559. The assassination of Prime Minister Hariri on 14 February 2005 affected the Lebanese public opinion which blamed the assassination on Syria, and provoked international pressure on Syria to immediately apply Resolution 1559. Another reason for this

pressure was the deteriorating American-Syrian relations after the War on Iraq (Zisser 2007, 172).

In 2004, a new factor came into the picture. UN Security Council Resolution 1559 passed on 2 September. This had a huge impact on Lebanon, Syria and Hizbullah. The international arena started to pressure Syria and Hizbullah. In this Resolution, the two major points were “2. Calls upon all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon; 3. Calls for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias;” (UNSCR 1559 2004). These two articles were the core of this Resolution and were meant to pressure both Syria and Hizbullah. The foreign forces meant in these terms were Syria and the armed militias were Hizbullah.

Thus even at the international level the Syrian-Hizbullah alliance started to become a burden on the Lebanese government. On 14 February 2005, Rafik Al-Harriri was assassinated. This unforgettable day became a national day of grievance when the Lebanese people felt they have lost the key figure in their political life.

Things started to degenerate in Lebanon since that time. UNSCR 1559 started to find its grounds inside Lebanon and the evacuation of the Syrian forces became inevitable. Lebanon became a battle field divided into two camps. The “Cedar Revolution” pushed the Syrians out of Lebanon by the popular movement calling for the Syrian evacuation out of Lebanon.

Commenting on Resolution 1559, on March 3, 2005, Bashar el-Assad stated before the People’s assembly;

“The fourth point, as far as 1559 is concerned, among all its provisions, the one related to Syria is withdrawal. Contrary to what many people believe, this is the simplest provision; because Syria is not against withdrawal. We started withdrawing in 2000. So when we talk about withdrawal, does anyone in Syria say that we will remain in Lebanon? Of course not. So, this is the simplest provision” (syria-lassad.org 2005)



However, the two Lebanese camps did not share the same perceptions. The 14<sup>th</sup> of March pushed towards 1559 and the Taif Accord, while the 8<sup>th</sup> of March represented the counter camp. It stood in defence of its long standing ally Syria. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, in the demonstration that took place in down town Beirut, Nasrallah delivered his allegiance to Syria. “We are gathered here today to endorse the goals we made public at the press conference, chief among them the need to offer our thanks to Assad’s Syria: the Syria of Hafiz al-Assad, the Syria of Bashar el-Assad, and to the honourable and steadfast Syrian people. We would also like to offer our thanks to the resisting Syrian army, which stood at our side during all the years of defence and resistance.” (Noe 2007, 321)

Thus even when the whole of Lebanon was in mourning, Hizbullah did not hide its great connection with Syria. In opposition to the Lebanese consensus, Hizbullah did not hide its strategic relations with Syria. Syria considers this relation as one of its best strategies in Lebanon and the region, since Hizbullah has quite a huge impact on the Lebanese politics. Moreover, Nasrallah openly declared the depth of his relation with Syria even though it might not be present on the ground anymore.

Even with Syria managing to keep such a support inside Lebanon through Hizbullah, one cannot dismiss that it was forced out of Lebanon and this fact has had great repercussions on it. For Bashar el-Assad, his loss of military control in Lebanon marked a turning point in his presidency. As aforementioned, Bashar had, on several occasions, tried to explain that Syria’s withdrawals from Lebanon was already planned and in motion. Bashar also tried to explain how convenient for Damascus the withdrawal is, since it was in Lebanon only to preserve the latter’s security. These

explanations were given to the Syrian people and to the international community as well. But despite Bashar's trials of softening the matter, we cannot miss that the withdrawal was an unexpected blow to Damascus. The next section examines the effects of Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon on it and on Lebanon as well.

#### **4.4 - Syria and Lebanon After the Withdrawal**

Syria has gone through a long road of increased isolation before it withdrew from Lebanon. This started by the end of the peace talks between Syria and Israel in April 2000, followed by the death of Hafiz el-Assad and the succession of the presidency by Bashar, later followed by 11 September 2001 attacks on the US which led to a change in US policies and the newly acquired "war against terrorism" policy. The isolation process picked up after the renewal of the presidency of Emile Lahoud followed by the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri on February 2005. This series of events created increased US impatience against Syria which drove Washington to issue the Syria Accountability and Lebanon Sovereign Restoration Act (ICG 2005, 1).

Bashar's renewal of Lahoud's tenure was an attempt to strengthen Syria's grip on Lebanon. Internally, however, it back fired and isolated Syria regionally and internationally leading to its forced withdrawal from Lebanon. This has affected Syria economically because of its financial ties with Lebanon (ICG 2005, 29).

Even though the withdrawal was smooth and ambassadors between both capitals were appointed in March 2009, a turning point in the two countries' relations, Syria and her allies in Lebanon voiced warnings of insecurities in Lebanon because of the Syrian withdrawal. Their argument is that Syria is the reason behind stability in Lebanon. These warnings were taken as threats by Lebanese opposition groups. As one member

of 14 March noted in an interview with ICG “This is Syria’s traditional game: create a problem then present yourself as the only solution” (ICG 2005, 32).

The wave of bombings that took place in Lebanon between 2005 and 2006 were in New Jdeideh, Kalsik, Sed el Bouchrieh, Broumana, Monot, Zalka and Jounieh as well as the assassination of Samir Kassir, Georges Hawi, Gebran Tueini, Pierre Gemayel, Walid Eido, Antoine Ghanem, Francois el Hajj, Wissam Eid, Saleh Aridi. There was also the assassination attempts on May Chidiac, Elias el Murr and Marwan Hamadeh. Commenting on some of the bombings in an interview with ICG, a Lebanese official said that “Syria has a long tradition of remote-control, long-distance attacks. Especially if the regime feels it is the next tarket for the US, it will do what it can to divert attention to Lebanon. People often target Syria; Lebanon pays the price” (ICG 2005, 32). And despite the fact that Syria has denied any hand in the bombings that occurred, the Lebanese who were members of the opposition camp accused it of being the mastermind behind them. Based on these accusations they have request the international court to investigate them along with the assassination of PM Harriri.

Syria’s geopolitical arena changed dramatically after Bashar assumed the presidency in Syria. Syria’s policies in Lebanon reflected these changes and responded to them. My next section discusses Syria’s changed relations with Iraq and reason behind these behind these changes.

#### **4.5 - Syria and Iraq: From Enemies to Friendly Neighbours**

Bashar el-Assad survived a trial period after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. This posed a threat to the regime in Syria. After the invasion it seemed that Syria was next on the United States’ agenda of regime change in the Middle East. Nonetheless

Bashar el-Assad turned out to be a skilled player in the geopolitical scene and gained strength regionally and internationally more than he ever had since his accession to power.

Bashar el-Assad turned out to be as skilled as his father Hafiz el-Assad in regional politics. Surviving the 2003 invasion and afterwards the assassination of former PM Hariri as well as the 2006 war in Lebanon between Hizbullah and Israel were clear examples. Between his support to Hizbullah and being on the border of an invaded state while having a similar regime, he has successfully emerged as a powerful player. Instead of a weak and fearful position, Syria came out as a winner from this situation since it was recognized by the United States and European countries as a needed player in Iraqi matters. “Syria owes much of its growing influence in the region to Iraq. On this issue, the Assad regime deftly managed to transform what is in reality a problematic hand into a winning one” (Simon 2009, 1).

Moreover, the United States later changed its isolation policy towards Syria, Iraq’s neighbour, and embraced a more cooperative policy at least until 2011 when popular uprising exploded in Syria. Furthermore, the invitation of Syria to the meeting in Baghdad on March 10, 2007 which gathered Iran, Syria, American and European diplomats was a clear example of the changed policies of the West in acknowledging Syria’s influence in the region (Yacoubian 2007, 1).

Iraq and Syria have been enemies for most of their modern history. They have fought for power and supremacy in the Arab world since their creation as independent states. The two countries entered coalitions against each other: Iraq entered the Baghdad Pact in 1955 with Iran, Pakistan and Egypt, and Syria created the United Arab Republic with Egypt. Both coalitions collapsed by 1961 and power in the two countries was taken

by a coup of the Baath Party in 1963. These coups were followed by a coup by Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 1968 and another one by Hafiz el-Assad in Syria in 1970. This added a personal rivalry between the two. Though both regimes had the same ideology, however the two leaders remained enemies for the next twenty-five years (Simon 2009, 3).

Several issues have led the two countries to embrace opposing positions, starting with Iraq's rejection of the disengagement agreements with Israel which resulted from Syria's participation in the peace process. Thus Iraq, leading the Arab rejectionist camp, denounced Resolutions 242 and 338. This was followed by disagreements over the Lebanese civil war, the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the first Gulf war. The two countries have completely severed their relations after Syria's support for Iran in the 1980-1988 war. Iraq retaliated by instigating anti-Syrian actions in Lebanon (ICG 2004, 15).

Both Iraq and Syria supported each other's enemies: Syria supported Jalal Talibani (Iraqi Kurds leader), members of the Da'wa Party and the communists, while Iraq sheltered rogue Syrian Baathists and members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In 1976 tension nearly escalated to military confrontation when Syria advanced militarily into Lebanon and Iraq gathered its troops at its borders. The conflict then shifted into the Lebanese soils where each country supported an opposing camp in the civil war; Iraq supported Michel Aoun against Syria. Furthermore Syria fought with American troops in the 1990-1991 Gulf war to keep Iraq from becoming an Arab superpower (ICG 2004, 15).

The mending in the relations between the two capitals began at the end of Hafiz el-Assad's rule. The long closed borders were opened in 1997. This shift was due to

several reasons, mainly growing hostility by neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Jordan, and most importantly the economic benefits behind this opening (ICG 2004, 16).

#### **4.6 – Bashar’s Syria and Iraq**

Syria was still playing on the American side in 2002. It had voted for UN Security Council 1441 which requested Iraq to declare its possession of Weapons of Mass destruction in order to allow UN inspectors in the country. Syria’s support for UNSCR 1441 was not approved to be a green light for a military attack against Iraq (ICG 2004, 17).

This attitude changed when clear American voices rally for a military attack on Iraq were heard. Bashar el-Assad then resorted to a more vocal attitude in opposing the war against Iraq. Syria even rejected a Kuwaiti-Qatari offer to persuade Saddam to resign. Directly after the initiation of the attack Bashar el-Assad publicly rejected the war and recalled the Arab Defence Agreement which states that “if an Arab country is invaded other Arab countries should defend it” (ICG 2004, 17).

Syrian officials stated publically what their stance towards the war was. Foreign Minister Faruq el Sharaa declared before the Foreign Affairs committee of the People’s Assembly in March 2003 that Syria wants Iraq’s victory and he compared the United States to Hitler’s Third Reich (Zisser 2007, 140). In an interview with *Al Safir* newspaper, Bashar el-Assad warned that Syria will not sit back and watch the recent events, since Syria might be the next in line on the United States’ agenda (*Al Safir*, 27 March 2003).

Syrian officials even allowed demonstration on their territory against the attack on Iraq signaling that “Syrian street” severely opposed these attacks. Bashar gained popular support for his stance. Thus Bashar’s reaction raised his popularity in the Arab world and not only in Syria because of his anti-war stance. Some argue that Syria’s reaction was based on its expectation of a strong Iraqi resistance; others argue that it was based on its fear of a US military attack on Syria afterwards (ICG 2004, 18).

In response to this reaction the West accused Syria of allowing militants to cross into Iraq, as well as allowing Iraqi officials safe haven in Syria. Some have also accused Syria of facilitating militants’ recruitment on its territory. Thus, Syria’s reaction to these accusations was to close its borders in April 2003 and to adopt a more friendly tone with Washington. Damascus also assisted in arresting some Iraqi officials that took refuge in its territory as well as softened its position on the Arab-Israeli peace process (Zisser 2007, 141).

Despite Syria’s claims of stopping militants’ crossing inside Iraq, United States’ irritation towards Syria grew as attacks on US troops increased. Syria has influence on the Sunni triangle in Northern Iraq since some tribes, like the Shammar, are present in Syria and in Northern Iraq as well. Syria was accused of having connections to an attack on U.S. troops in Faluja in 2004. American officials claimed that they have retrieved documents that proved that former Baath leaders were organizing the attacks from Syrian grounds (Zisser 2007, 145).

Even Iraqi officials have accused the Syrian government of not doing enough to stop insurgents from crossing its borders. Al Qaeda Jihadists and former Iraqi Baathist elements resided in Syria and crossed its borders into Iraq. But, Syrian officials stated on several occasions how difficult it is to safeguard its borders. Bashar el-Assad have

explained himself in his speech before the People's Assembly in March 2005, that a delegation visited Syria on December 2004 comprising representatives from the U.S. Defence Department, the State Department, intelligence, and the army. The delegation's main goal was to insure that Syria is cooperating in maintaining its borders. He commented that for sure Syria is cooperating however,

“We said that was impossible. Of course we don't claim that the borders are completely controlled. Usually the Americans say they could not control their borders with Mexico, yet they tell us to control our borders. It is a strange argument” (syria-alassad.org 2005).

Syria's support of the insurgency in Iraq was its way of defending its geopolitical interests; however, in November 2006 Syria signed a security cooperation agreement with Iraq in order to control its borders. Furthermore, it requested the assistance of the U.S. and Britain because of its incapability to hold full control of the huge border between Syria and Iraq. Nonetheless, a report by the National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq in February 2007 suggested that even if the insurgency inside Iraq diminished largely, it will have a very minimal effect on the security inside Iraq because the latter is moved by internal factors (Yacoubian 2007, 3).

The confrontation between the United States and Syria deteriorated throughout 2004 because of the Syrian position towards the war on Iraq as well as its policy towards Lebanon. It then climaxed with the prompt issuance of Syria Accountability Act in May 2004. American Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, stated that “Syria's conduct is turning that country to an obstacle to progress in Arab-Israeli peace process and in the reforms that the U.S. sought to bring about in the Middle East, and responsible for causing serious damage to relations between the two countries”( Zisser 2007, 145).



Bashar el-Assad commented on his relationship with the American administration in an interview with the *New York Times* on December 1, 2003. He explained that the reason behind this deteriorating relationship is not Iraq but Israel.

The Israeli factor is the only one that is still pushing Syrian-American relationship into a difficult period. Otherwise, why did we cooperate with the United States against terrorism? Why did we help the United States in combating terrorism? We could have ignored that completely. This makes me ask this question: if Syria is cooperating with the U.S. and offering a great help including saving American lives, how can the U.S. response be so negative towards Syria? The problem is not Iraq (*New York Times*2003).

In an attempt to be more involved in the future of Iraq, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid el-Moallem visited Baghdad in November 2006. This visit was historical because it occurred after 24 years of no relations between the two states. Syria has long had many interests in Iraq because of its geographical proximity, from political, to economic and trade interests. The economic relations between the countries were amended in 1997 and 2006, marking a new page in the bilateral diplomatic relations (Yacoubian 2007, 2).

#### **4.7 - Syrian- Iraqi Economic Relations under Bashar**

Bashar el-Assad's ascension to the presidency in Syria was the main turning point in the diplomatic relations between Baghdad and Damascus. Upon his accession to power Bashar and Saddam signed several bilateral agreements and reopened their borders. This was made official by the visit of Iraqi Vice President Izzat Ibrahim el Douri to Damascus in November 2000 (Simon 2009, 4).

The economic relations were accelerated through many steps taken by both countries. These involved reopening the borders, lifting visa requirements for Syrian and Iraqi citizens, signing agreements related to commerce, transportation and

communication. These agreements brought mutual benefits since Syria had an interest in being part of Iraqi economy and Iraq saw in Syria as a gateway from UN trade sanctions (Gambill 2001, 1).

The economic rapprochement continued, later reaching a tariff reduction agreement between both countries signed in January 2001 by Syrian Prime Minister Muhammad Mustafa Miru and Iraqi Vice President Tahan Yassin Ramadan. This agreement was meant to reduce the trade restrictions between the two countries. It was a “starting point towards turning over a new leaf of Syrian-Iraqi cooperation” (Sana 2001).

Another turning point in Iraqi-Syrian economic relations was implemented in November 2000 when Basharel-Assad decided to reopen the oil pipeline linking Kirkuk oil fields with Syria’s port of Banias. This breakthrough allowed Syria to import around 150.000 to 200.000 barrels of oil per day for a discounted price thus increasing its export its own oil at the international barrel price. On the other hand Iraq benefited by escaping UN sanctions which imposed monitoring Iraqi oil revenues and imposing that they “be disbursed only for humanitarian purposes” (Gambill 2001, 2).

Furthermore, Iraq opened its market for low quality cheap Syrian products in the late 1990s, which were also exported duty free. By 2001 the Syrian-Iraqi Higher committee had signed a financial and commercial protocol to encourage this type of trade. In 2002 they started forming a joint Iraqi-Syrian holding company to administer the financial projects of the two countries (ICG 2004, 16).

Having reached 10 per cent of Syria’s GDP, in 2003 Syrian Iraqi trade had stopped due to the war on Iraq. However, it was resumed a few months after the American attacks. During the war, Syria and Iraq had between 100\$ and 200\$ million in

trade. By 2007, this number reached 800\$ million in trade which was the biggest number scored during their trading years. Syria has also benefited from the Iraqi expatriates, 1.3\$ billion were added to its economy (Simon 2009, 17).

Despite the financial benefits for Syria, the 2003 war against Iraq had negative implications on the country. Syria spends more than US\$1.5 billion a year on Iraqi immigrants. Even though it costs each Iraqi US\$50 to stay in Syria legally, they are still a burden on its economy and it wants their return eventually to Iraq. However many Iraqis who have returned to Iraq in 2007 returned to Syria due to the security unrest in Iraq (Oudat, August 2008). After the uprising in Syria, some of them returned back to Syria.

#### **4.8 - Conclusion**

This chapter has examined how Bashar el-Assad has changed his policies in order to cope with the pressure he faced in order to preserve the regional balance of power in the case of Iraq, also to maintain the security of the Syrian ruling regime in the case of Lebanon.

Syria has faced a great deal of pressure from the United States to change its policy vis-à-vis neighbouring countries and terrorist groups. The pressure increased greatly after the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the U.S. presence militarily at its borders. The American administration requested Syria to stop its support for Hizbullah and Palestinian militants as well as control its borders with Iraq to stop Jihadists infiltration. The military attack on Iraq pushed Syria to change its policy towards Iraq and to oppose the U.S. This was rooted in Syria's geographical proximity to Iraq and the fear of another attack on Syria. The Syria Accountability Act was the

turning point for Syria to change its policy towards Lebanon and to withdraw from its territories. The next chapter sums up the aspects of this thesis and provides some thoughts on the current uprising in Syria and the future effects this situation has on Syria and on its relations with Neighbouring countries.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusion**

#### **5.1 – Summary and General Findings**

Most Scholars have tried to explain Syria's foreign policy and the affecting constituents which play a major role in shaping it. Using the realist theory of balance of power, I have tackled the most important factors playing this role. Syria's foreign policy emancipates out of its role in the Middle Eastern politics and sets it in the middle of the Arab Israeli conflict. Due to this fact, Hafiz and later on Bashar have strived to keep their policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Golan Heights in check to win over their people. Syria's foreign policy stems out of the need to keep rallying the Syrian population with its governing system. Syria has also aligned itself with Iran in order to protect itself against the U.S. hegemonic ambitions in the region especially after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nevertheless, Syria has made sure not to cut the umbilical cord with the states completely since it needs to leverage its economic survival through Iraq and as a way to negotiate the return of the Golan Heights.

The Syrian government has established durable relations with some of its neighbouring countries like its relations with Iran due to their common interest to balance out the United States' meddling in the affairs of the Middle East especially after 2003 invasion of Iraq. Both countries are always emphasizing their deep rooted foreign

policy ties as they are facing the same hegemon. Their relationship which started with Hafiz el Assad and survived the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian revolution and even the invasion of Iraq has proved to work for both sides. Iran has allied itself with the Arab Syria as a means to win herself a strategic partner in the Arab world and revitalize their interests in the region especially since Syria is the connection between Hizbullah and Iran.

Syria's geopolitical arena changed dramatically after Bashar assumed the presidency in Syria. Syria's policies in Lebanon reflected these changes and responded to them. On the other hand, it has played its cards smart by finding a rather powerful ally in the region to support it economically due to its secluded position especially after the 2005 assassination of Hariri. Syria down plays its foreign policy in the Middle East by having a more diplomatic approach towards the case of Iraq for example. Though, they had opposed the Iraqi invasion of 2003, yet they have cooperated with the Americans to rid them of Islamic insurgencies. Both countries have tried to seek to maximize their interests with all the key players in the region while trying to protect their strong alliance. Their marriage is based on mutual interest without the possibility of a conflict of interest and same-fate strategy. If opportunities arise for either any of the two countries, the other turns a blind eye as to not affect their mutual interests. Their foreign policy is more of protective policy of each other without eliminating one sided interests when the need arises.

As aforementioned, Bashar el Assad has worked on the friendships his father had started with countries like Iran and Turkey. In order to sustain Syria's key role in the region, as well as preserving the regional balance of power with Israel. The above discussed case studies have shown that Bashar el Assad has moved forward with the

same foreign policy as his father. When he first came to power Bashar himself has stated in an interview with *Al Safir* on December 30, 2000, that he is the same as his father.

Bashar best displayed adherence to his father's footsteps in conducting Syria's foreign policy. He has maintained the strategic partnership with Iran even with all the obstacles this partnership has faced, whether from pressure from the West and especially from the United States and Israel to end this partnership. He has built on the newly created friendship by his father with Turkey, and worked greatly on being "a good neighbour" to the extent that eventually Turkey hosted Syrian-Israeli peace talks after being long dormant. And finally, Bashar has played his foreign policy cards towards Israel and the peace talks same as his father did.

As we have seen earlier, both Hafiz el Assad and his son Bashar have put a great deal of importance on the game of diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries as well as Western countries. This has benefited both leaders in gaining legitimacy inside Syria by mobilizing the public against the United States and Israel in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

## **5.2 – Future Inquiries**

The current Syrian regime cannot keep on focusing on the International and Regional foreign policy-making it has mastered for the past 40 years. Though this strategy, as we have seen in this paper, has led Syria to become a key player in the Region and a main decision maker in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but the recent events have put several question marks on the sustainability of the regime in Syria.

Fawwaz Traboulsi discussed the current situation in Syria and noted that even though Syria is the last Arab country to endure the domino effect of the Arab uprisings, yet it is not immune from it. The uprisings which started in Tunis then moved to Egypt, later Yemen then Bahrain and Libya have reached Syria in February 2011 (Traboulsi 2011).

Traboulsi explained the policy of Mumana'a Syria practiced by focusing on Syria's international rather than internal legitimacy. Syria has sustained this policy by focusing on its regional role on several levels. Both Hafiz and Bashar have played the Hizbullah and the Palestinian resistance cards in the Arab-Israeli conflict. They have maintained their alliance with Iran and they have kept the Peace on the Israeli Northern Front (Traboulsi 2011). Syria's regional and international diplomatic policy throughout the 40 years of the Assad rule was enough to sustain the stability of the country internally and to keep the legitimacy of the ruling regime however as it is clear by the current uprising is that it is no longer enough.

The need for internal reform is as pressing as it ever was and Bashar should tackle several economic and social reforms including the following: 1- Stop the State of Emergency in Syria and release the political detainees from prison. 2- Stop the Baath Party rule and allow the formation of Parties. 3- Issue a new Law for freedom of speech and freedom of establishment of Newspapers. 4- Incorporate Security and Intelligence forces in one institution having a clear goal of National Defence. 5- Formulation of a new elections Law that does not include the current quota. 6- Give the People's Assembly the power to give the vote of confidence to the government (Traboulsi 2011).

The on-going debate is whether the uprising in Syria is driven by the Syrian popular demand or by foreign forces. In an interview with Ahmad Shokr and Anjali

Kamat, on September 02, 2011, Traboulsi notes that “the Syrian regime knows this uprising is not a conspiracy and that foreign intervention is very limited” (Traboulsi 2011). He continues that foreign intervention is propaganda by the Syrian regime to inflict fear and suppress the population.

Whether this uprising was started internally or not, it is obvious that the international community is using it to inflict pressure on the Syrian government. The current pressure for reform on behalf of the international community, from United States to European countries, is to drive Syria into coping with these countries’ demands that have been voiced since 9/11 attacks. These demands are; to end Syria’s strategic alliance with Iran, to end its armament of Hizbullah, to close Hamas offices in Syria and to re-enter the peace negotiations with Israel under Israeli-American terms. Also Syria is requested to join the World Trade Organization which will lead to foreign intervention in Syria’s economy leading to inflicting debt on the Syrian government noting that it is till now one of the few countries which is debt free.

We need to look also at the effect of this current situation on the Syrian relation with its neighbouring countries such as Turkey. Lately Erdogan has vocally expressed his dissatisfaction with the Syrian government violent suppression of the uprising as well as the unwillingness of Syria’s introduction of reform to the government’s policies and laws. The Turkish President has threatened to cut any relation with Syria if it doesn’t stop the violence and cave to the Syrian people demand.

However, “the Turkish threats are much louder than any actions they are willing to take. They simply want to mobilize international mediation to solve the crisis” (Traboulsi 2011). He also proceeds by stating that “the United States still seems to be



holding on the idea that Syria is a factor of relative stability on the northern border of Israel and there is no alternative to the regime”(Traboulsi 2011).

Finally, we need to note that the Syrian regime has reached a critical point. If it caves in to the pressures of introducing reforms it might lead to the change of the ruling Baath regime eventually by democratic vote. And if it continues repressing the uprising it might lead to the regime’s overthrow as has happened to other Arab authoritarian regimes. What is next for Syria and for Bashar el-Assad? Will the Assad regime fall after 40 years of rule? Will the army take control and administer democratic elections or will the later be delayed as is happening in Egypt?

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