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by Hamoud Salhi; Strategic Insights, v. 6,
issue 4 (April 2005)

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Strategic Insights, v.6, issue 4 (April 2005)

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Syria's Threat to America's National Interest

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 4 (April 2005)

by [Hamoud Salhi](#)

Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

Syria's threat to America's national interest in the Middle East is exaggerated and can only be understood in the context of U.S. plans to reconfigure the Middle East. Knowing now that the motive for invading Iraq was strategic (to use Iraq as a permanent military operation base), taking over Syria would give the United States strategic depth in the region, allowing for the creation of a Sunni-dominated state to counterbalance the Shia in Iraq and Iran, in turn tipping the balance of power even further in favor of the United States' regional allies Israel and Turkey.

The Strategy

Central to today's U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is the concept of strategic preemption.^[1] But this is hardly new. The United States has implemented several policies to safeguard the continuous flow of oil and other national interests, including a policy of oil-denial, carried out since the mid-1940s; Rapid Deployment Forces during the Carter administration; Dual Containment and the "Quiet War" under the Clinton administration; and the Preemptive Doctrine under the current Bush administration. These policies have been instrumental in maintaining U.S. hegemony in the region and preempting any threats that could damage U.S. interests or those of its allies including Israel, Turkey, and the Arab states of the Gulf region.

In recent decades, the United States has become more aggressive in its preemptive strategy, beginning with the Clinton administration's "Quiet War" (or so it is called in the Middle East) in Iraq.

Following a series of failures by the Clinton administration to rally international support for a UN-backed attack on Iraq, the United States and Great Britain took unilateral actions to lead a four-day bombing strike on Baghdad in late December 1998. These overt actions drew heavy criticism regionally and worldwide. However, according to former Undersecretary of State Martyn Indyk, the United States received the blessing of the Gulf leaders to do things "quietly."^[2] The United States changed tactics by more discreetly engaging in destroying Iraq's military and economic infrastructure. This quiet war was carried out by U.S. and British airplanes making daily sorties and, using the latest technologies, bombing Iraqi facilities under the pretext that they represented potential future threats.

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, President George W. Bush appeared to develop the quiet war policy into an open war policy of his own Preemptive Doctrine against the threat of terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). President Bush's approach was revealed in a document made public by the National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS) in September 2002. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell described the strategic goals as follows: first, "to reassure the American people that the government possessed common sense," adding that "if you recognize a clear and present threat that is undeterrable by the means you have at hand, then you must deal with it."

Second, "to convey to our adversaries that they were in big trouble." Powell believes that the open war policy of the Preemptive Doctrine sends a strong message to terrorist leaders, making them think twice before seizing an opportunity to harm the United States. "It was worth putting the leaders of such countries on notice that the potential cost of their opportunism had just gone up."^[3]

Accordingly, the United States had two goals in Iraq: to remove the threat of a rogue regime with WMD and to bring democracy to the Middle East through the establishment of a model democratic state that would cause a spill-over effect. This would force the Syrian and Iranian regimes to re-fashion their systems in ways more compatible with the White House's views. Simultaneously, the proliferation of democracy in the Arab world would ultimately resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict in line with what Israel has hoped to achieve. Ultimately, with the entire Arab world moving towards democracy, the United States would succeed in eradicating the threat of terrorism.

In his own words, President Bush explained that invading Iraq was necessary to "shake off decades of failed policy... and advance freedom in the greater Middle East, to help end a cycle of dictatorship and radicalization that brings millions of people to misery and brings danger to our own people... if the greater Middle East joins the democratic revolution that has reached much of the world, the lives of millions in that region will be bettered and the trend of conflict and fears will be ended at its sources."^[4]

The Reconfiguration of the Middle East

But Middle East leaders lowered the United States' expectations about the future of the region at the June 2004 G-8 summit meeting. According to newspaper reports,^[5] Middle Eastern leaders were able to convince President Bush to adopt a more realistic approach to democratization. The leaders complained that the United States was dictating its vision on the Middle East by presenting its proposal in terms of an initiative and/or plan to democratize the Middle East without consulting with the region's people or leaders. The leaders lobbied for the use of the term "partnership" to highlight their desire to work with the United States on issues of tolerance, pluralism, economic privatization, and capitalism. The leaders also succeeded in changing the term "greater Middle East" to "broader Middle East," apparently to exclude Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are perceived by Arab state leaders as being too undemocratic to be included as part of the partnership. The Arab states preferred the partnership to include just them, the United States, and Iran.

Critique

The Preemptive Doctrine has been critiqued in the United States and the Middle East alike. In the United States, the open war policy has generated a serious controversy among supporters of "hard" and "soft" power approaches, both of which are in turn heavily criticized by advocates of what I call "no" power at all.

It is no secret that neoconservatives have long planned for the reconfiguration of the Middle East. Many cite the neoconservative group Project for the New American Century, which sent a letter to President Bush on September 20, 2001, recommending the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, even if no direct link to the 9/11 attacks was found.^[6] Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz has admitted that the purpose of the Project for the New American Century was to revive U.S. supremacy in global politics, which had been damaged by the failure of Vietnam. Additionally, there are several policy papers written by neoconservatives who advocate a series of regime changes in Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

Citing a position paper for incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 written by now well established neoconservatives—Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, and David and Meyrav Wurmser—titled “*A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*,” Chalmers Johnson argues that the attempt to reshape the Middle East began in 1996.^[7] According to Johnson the four neoconservatives recommend that Israel “advocate the elimination of Saddam Hussein as a first step towards regime change in Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.”^[8] The paper also calls on Israel to reject the 1993 Oslo Accord and “the underlying concept of land for peace and to permanently annex the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip.”^[9] Johnson concludes that in November 2002, “Prime Minister Ariel Sharon echoed these ideas when he urged the United States to undertake regime change in Iran as soon as it finished with Iraq.”^[10]

Another neoconservative, Michael Ledeen, relates in the book *The War Against the Terror Masters* his frustration with CIA Director John Deutch in 1996 for not including in CIA plans an unexpected attack of a Pearl Harbor magnitude.^[11] Contemplating U.S. policy towards the Middle East in the aftermath of Desert Storm (Ledeen calls it “Desert Shame”^[12]), Ledeen blames Presidents George H. Bush and Bill Clinton for trusting the UN and not pursuing regime change in Iraq.^[13] According to Ledeen, Desert Storm made matters worse for the United States because it “laid the groundwork for the disastrous decade that followed.”^[14] Ledeen further argues that “the shortsightedness of the Secretary of State and his top people was of a piece of the self-deceiving culture that had led to 9/11 in the first place.”^[15] Ledeen states:

“Just as it was a mistake to conceive of Desert Shame as simply a battle to drive the Iraqi troops out of Kuwait, our mission in Iraq should not have been merely “regime change” in Baghdad. We should have considered it one battle in the war against the terror masters in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. It should have been seen as just one piece of the overall mission, not an end in itself. It was folly to believe—as many had to confess they did believe—that we could deal with Iraq alone, and then work out a strategy for the others.”^[16]

Other neoconservatives downplay the role of international institutions and believe that the United States is correct in acting unilaterally. Max Boot and Charles Krauthammer prefer to use the UN only when necessary and in ways not to undermine the United States’ position in global politics. Krauthammer urged the United States to push for a resolution seeking financial assistance for the reconstruction of Iraq in order to entice countries like Pakistan, India, and Russia, who would only contribute under a UN umbrella. “The U.S. is not overstretched,” says Krauthammer, “but psychologically we are up against our limits. The American people are simply not prepared to undertake worldwide nation building.”^[17]

Liberals believe that the United States should have gone to the UN and worked with international institutions before invading Iraq. The soft power camp critiqued the open war policy of the Preemptive Doctrine for excessive reliance on military might and the overt promotion of U.S. national interest.^[18] Liberals argue that the Preemptive Doctrine ignores existing international law and encourages weaker nations to follow in the United States’ footsteps.^[19]

Nye believes that the United States got it right when it identified transnational terrorism and WMD and a combination of both as the major threats to the United States, but added that President Bush’s approach fails “to sort out how to go about the implementation process of this

strategy.”[20] In this matter, Nye calls for the United States to respect alliances and work with them so that other countries will join voluntarily, in turn making the alliances more productive for the United States.

"In the global age, the attractiveness of the United States will be crucial to our ability to achieve the outcomes we want. Rather than having to put together pickup coalitions of the willing for each new game, we will benefit if we are able to attract others into institutional alliances and eschew weakening those we have already created.”[21]

The soft power camp also understands that, from a strategic perspective, the United States' dependency on Middle East oil is disturbing. Projections suggest that demand for Middle East oil will continue to increase and at unprecedented rates. In 2002 the MENA region—not including Iran—met 42% of Europe's oil needs, 79% of Japan's, 93% of Austria's, and 39% of China.[22] By 2025, world oil consumption will increase by 54% over 2000 levels, and OPEC's share of the world's oil supply will total 54.1% in 2030—up from 28.1% in 2000.

However, this camp disagrees with the premise that in order to protect U.S. oil interests the United States is compelled by the rising threat of terrorism, the proliferation of WMD, the emergence of hostile rogue states, widespread anti-Americanism, and increased instability of Middle East regimes to be aggressively pro-active in its foreign policy approach. They support a multilateral approach working with the UN and the international community.

The “no” power camp includes well-established scholars such as Samir Amin, Carl Boggs, Chalmers Johnson, Gore Vidal, and Immanuel Wallerstein; peace movement organizations including Not In My Name and the ANSWER Coalition; and political leaders such as Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinick. This camp is anti-war for ideological and humanitarian reasons.

The "no" power camp argues that the United States has become an imperial power and is in decline because it has created too many enemies, as did previous empires before collapsing.[23] Accordingly, the "no" power approach highlights America's interventionist role in global politics and claims that the United States has been hijacked by interests other than those of the American people. Specifically, this camp points to President George W. Bush's hawkish cabinet to suggest that U.S. foreign policy is being controlled by neoconservatives whose only goal is to control Middle East oil.

As such, they blame the U.S.-led coalition for obstructing the work of the UN in Iraq, and the Bush Administration in particular for resorting to unilateralism and interventionism.

They believe that the United States is worse off than it was before September 11, 2001. According to Wallerstein, “When George Bush leaves office, he will be leaving the United States significantly weaker than when he assumed office. He will have turned a slow decline into a much speedier one.”[24]

The Middle East

In the Middle East, the Preemptive Doctrine has been condemned as imperialistic and depicted as a ploy to maintain the status quo rather than changing it in a way that would serve the interests of the Arab masses. In “How to Achieve Democracy Through Foreign Invasion,” Arab writer Hamdan Hamdan questions the United States' real motive for the reconfiguration of the Middle East. Hamdan expresses serious doubt that the United States means well: “How can a democratic goal be achieved under a foreign occupation?” He adds, “And since when can democracy be achieved without a radical transformation from within a society culminating in the rule of law?” According to Hamdan, the Preemptive Doctrine is fundamentally flawed because it is

imperialistic (a replica of Israeli Zionism) and because it does not respect the natural progress of Arab society.[25]

Moroccan journalist and researcher Abdel Samad Mahieddine develops the same theme, but his recommendations are different. According to Mahieddine, democracy cannot be imposed from the outside because it is a product of a country's development and specific historical circumstances which cannot be replicated or exported from one country to another. But instead of rejecting the United States' call for democracy, Mahieddine wants the Arab world to endorse it. Prefacing his argument with the assumption that the U.S. is not sincere in its call for democracy in the Middle East and knowing that Arab leaders will not seek to democratize, Mahieddine wants Arab intellectuals and democrats to call America's bluff—actually welcoming the democratization initiative and working to make it happen. According to Mahieddine this is the only way to defeat America's imperialist design in the Arab world.[26]

Arab writer Abdel Wahab al Fendi addresses the Preemptive Doctrine from the perspective of Arab democrats. He argues that the United States' recommendations are insulting and degrading to the Arab people. According to al Fendi, "the problem is not that the Arabs are illiterate and in need to be educated, or poor needing to be fed, or ignorant and needing to be informed; rather the problem lies elsewhere..." and "Arab intellectual democrats are frequently arrested and prosecuted and die under torture. If the Arabs are to be helped, they must be helped with getting rid of the current regimes, and certainly this will not happen with [the United States] inviting them to summit meeting and conferences to discuss the fate of democracy in their part of the world." [27]

The Syrian Threat

Syria has not been named a member of the Axis of Evil, but it has been listed among rogue states that the United States considers supporters of terrorism and with WMD. Accordingly, the U.S. Congress passed Syria's Accountability Act in May 2004, and President Bush made it comprehensive to include freezing the assets of the Syrian government and those of its citizens.

A regime change in Syria would serve the United States in at least three specific ways:

1. First, the new regime would likely be dominated by the country's Sunni majority. Given the Sunnis' deep seated rivalry with the Shia, such a regime would benefit the United States by enabling it to gain leverage in regional politics, particularly vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq.
2. Second, a pro-U.S. regime in Syria would tip the region's balance of power toward Israel . Accordingly the United States and Israel would be in position to dictate a peace settlement to the Syrians over the Golan Heights.
3. Third, with the establishment of a pro-U.S. regime, the United States will have completed its final stage of encircling Iran. This would further tip the region's balance of power in favor of Israel , and ultimately would open new doors for the United States to be actively involved in toppling the Iranian regime.

The Specific Threats

Testifying before a House International Relations Subcommittee Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton described Syria as posing a dual threat to the United States in the form of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. In regard to terrorism, Syria is alleged to be a sponsor of organizations the United States considers terrorist, including Hizbollah of Lebanon and Hamas and Islamic Jihad of Palestine. Although Bolton admits that there are no specific ties linking Syria to any of these organizations, he insists that there are strong indicators—particularly Syria's assistance to anti-coalition forces in Iraq. As for the threat of WMD Bolton testified that Syria had the most advanced chemical weapons capabilities in the

Arab world and is “without question, among the states, those most aggressively seeking to acquire or develop WMD and the means of delivery.”[28]

In the area of nuclear energy, according to Bolton, Syria has an effective research and development program and has attempted to get dual usage technology from the International Atomic Energy Agency and is working with China and Russia on developing a civilian nuclear energy program. Additionally, even though Syria is a signatory of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it has yet sign to sign the Additional Protocol NPT. Similarly Syria has declined to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention and still has not ratified the Biological Weapons Convention it signed in 1972. Finally, Bolton testified that Syria has an advanced conventional weapons program and hundreds of short and long range missiles equipped with chemical warheads.

Many of these claims have also been reported by U.S. think tanks and Israeli military analysts and officers. Eric Crodly of Monterey’s Center for Non-Proliferation Studies writes that Syria conducted a Chemical Weapons (CW) program at its own research center (Centre d’etudes et de recherche scientifique) in Damascus and has production facilities in Aleppo and Homs. According to Crodly, Syria has produced nerve gas, including VX.[29]

In its assessment of Syria’s security potential, Jane’s Sentinel reaches similar conclusions. Syria is said to possess large quantities of nerve agents and VX and biological agents such as botulism, and to have developed an arsenal of WMD to counter Israel’s war machine.[30] Israeli Air force Chief of Staff Major General Ben Eliahu[31] and head of Homa Anti-Missile Defense Program Uzi Rubin both claim that Syria had been developing WMD and that Syria had acquired the largest ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East.

How Real is the Syrian Threat?

The question remains: how real is the Syrian threat? Inflating Syria’s WMD capabilities can be self-serving. The United States and Israel may resort to exaggeration in order to justify the need for better weapons (in Israel’s case) or to justify an attack (the United States’ case). Needless to say Syria also has a motive to make itself appear more threatening than it actually is.

Thus, in order to test the credibility of the Syrian threat, the following section will try to examine Syria’s capabilities in relation to existing powers in the region. Specifically, I will look at how Syria fares in terms of military and economic capabilities in relation to the other regional powers—Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Then, I will move on to discuss the Syrian leadership’s modus operandi to see whether or not it has designs that could be interpreted as threatening to the United States or its regional allies.

Military Capabilities

Syria is a mid-size regional power with adequate conventional capabilities and a finely tuned military strategy. Syria does not have the military capabilities or the kind of alliance with NATO that its arch-enemies Israel and Turkey have had. But, on balance, the Syrian leadership has succeeded in etching a role for itself in regional politics by being pragmatic and building alliances with Iran and other Arab countries. Given its military capabilities, Syria is unlikely to project its power beyond its current borders or use WMD against the United States or its allies in the region. However, Syria will continue to look for any military edge that will give it regional leverage, even if that means launching a nuclear program, acquiring WMD, or supporting groups that the United States considers terrorists. For Syria, such strategies are a matter of survival.

Assets

The Syrian army is massive. The army has been instrumental in domestic politics, successfully maintaining order through repressive means, but it has failed to recapture Syrian territory, particularly the Golan Heights. This is partly because the Syrian leadership has been more concerned with maintaining order in the country than building a sophisticated and well equipped military to liberate the territories Syria lost to Israel and Turkey.

The complex structure of the military combined with its size has reduced the likelihood of plots, coups, and rebellions against the Syrian regime. For practical purposes large structures are broken down into units and subunits. This allows for close supervision, which in turn means fewer opportunities for servicemen to organize and plan to overthrow the regime. This also enabled the leadership to uncover seven major rebellion attempts since 1963.

Additionally, the military's complicated structure has been instrumental in guaranteeing the predominance of the minority Alawites in the Sunni-dominated country. Fearful of a Sunni-led military coup, Hafez al Assad created a mechanism capable of reproducing the Alawites' control indefinitely. The military academy has a preferential admission treatment towards the Alawites by way of their sectarian background. This enables the regime to control the recruitment process, leaving no chance for a Sunni-dominated academy. Once in the academy, recruits are exposed to heavy indoctrination in Ba'ath party ideology and in the cult of their leader, the late Hafez al Assad. In the upper military echelon, Alawites are appointed to top positions. Deputy Alawites are assigned to Sunni commanders, and kept in close contact with other superior Alawite officers regarding the Sunni commanders' activities. It is believed Assad paid special attention to these deputies, and even checked in on them with early morning phone calls.

Liabilities

But there have been many downsides to the preferential treatment accorded to the Alawites, including intra-military conflict and serious disciplinarian problems such as disobedience and defections. The ongoing tensions between Alawites and Sunnis have in turn benefited the Muslim Brotherhood parties.

The situation is even more complicated with the new leader, Bashar al Assad. So far Bashar has successfully secured his position with many old and new Sunni and Alawite guards supporting him. He has been cautionary in his approach to many issues, taking a middle road and not rocking the boat too much. He has for example made economic reforms one of his priorities, but he has made only mild progress perhaps because of his attempt to accommodate the interests of everyone affected by the process. The same can be said about his earlier move to launch an anti-corruption campaign. That issue is now almost forgotten, perhaps because he believed it to be too dangerous to tackle so early in his tenure. But according to specialists, Bashar's ultimate test will be a major domestic or external crisis. At that point his military chiefs can easily decide whether to fully trust him or revolt.^[32]

Additionally, the military's massive size comes at a price Syria can ill afford. The army uses up to 11% of its GDP. Relative to the region, this is high for a country Syria's size, and it is a reason why Syria remains in debt. Most problematic is that the bulk of the military's expenditures goes to routine maintenance, salaries, and basic necessities such as housing and food. As a consequence, Syria is not spending on upgrading its weaponry or training its officers in newly developed military technologies. The annual Military Balance for 2003/2004, published by the IIS, show that Syria's most recent arms purchase was in 1999. Considering that the relative effectiveness of a military weapon is five years, most of Syria's military arsenal may now be obsolete.

However, according to some analysts, these same weaknesses make Syria threatening. It is believed that Syrian leaders may resort to WMD to compensate for their military's shortcomings,

and that Hafez al Assad had used this very tactic to gain leverage in his negotiations with Israel. While this seems logical, it appears inconsistent with how the Syrian leadership has operated over the years. As I will show in the next section, past experience shows that Syria interprets international relations well and, knowing how the world community would react to such a tactic, Syria is not likely to be the first to resort to WMD. [See [Table 1](#).]

Table 1:

Country	Defense Expenditure as % of GDP			Number Armed Forces (000)		Estimated Reservists (000)	Paramilitary (000)
	1985	2001	2002	1985	2002	2002	2002
Israel	21.2	9.2	9.7	142.0	161.5	425.0	8
Turkey	3.1	4.9	5.1	630.0	514.8	378.7	150.0
Saudi Arabia	19.6	14.1	12.0	62.5	199.5	n/a	15.5
Iran	7.7	3.8	4.6	610	520.0	350.0	40.0
Syria	16.4	10.9	10.3	402.5	319.0	354.0	108.0
Egypt	13.0	4.0	3.9	445.0	443.0	254.0	330.0

Source: *The International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 2003/2004. p 336.*

Table 2:

	Total Armed Forces						
	Army	Navy	Air Force	Other	Active	Reservists	Total
Israel	125,000	7,000	35,000	----	167,600	358,000	525,600
Turkey	402,000	52,750	60,100	----	515,850	378,700	893,550
Saudi Arabia	75,000	----	----	----	124,500	----	124,500
Iran	350,000	18,000	52,000	120,000	540,000	350,000	890,000
Syria	215,000	4,000	40,000	60,000	319,000	354,000	673,000

Source: *The International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 2003/2004.*

Economic Capabilities

Syria's economic capabilities do not support the argument that Syria could become a threatening force in the region. In a war scenario, Syria will be handicapped by its poor economy, and as such, the country lacks the economic depth needed to sustain a war. Further, that is not expected to change any time in the near future. Syria is lagging behind in technological advancement and, worse, it is not preparing future generations in technological and scientific fields. Much of this a result of a state planned economy. It would take a serious economic overhaul for Syria to develop into a contender for a real leadership role in the Middle East.

Syria is a poor country, a result of its state planned economy program. The state has relied heavily on the public sector to build a national economy, but accorded a significant role to the private sector. This was done more by necessity than conviction.

The state sector has generated most of the fixed capital required for the establishment of the national economic infrastructure including construction of roads, factories, heavy industry, and so on. Additionally, the public sector has been the main source of employment, capital investment, and production.

In this context, the role of the private sector has been limited to light industries, manufactured goods, trade, agriculture, and construction.

According to official documents, Syria considers private entrepreneurs natural allies of the state because they both are driven by the same goal—to promote the development of the country. But this partnership has failed to live up to its potential. The symbiotic relationship that the state intended to establish with the private sector has proven unworkable. Overly politicized, the process of national development has become secondary to politics.

From the start it was obvious the state sought a relationship with the private sector for self-serving reasons more than anything else. The state had undertaken the major task of building a socialist economy with resources it simply did not have. The state's declared industrialization import substitution would require heavy investment, most of which was expected to create an economic infrastructure from scratch. More problematic for the state was that the returns on its investments in the public industrial sector were long term, and as such the state had to wait up to 15 years to see earn any kind of profit. The state faced a similar problem with its agrarian program. The state embarked on a very promising land reform program, but could not rally its people around the policy. Simply put, the people had misgivings about the state, and thus were not eager to work the land. The need to fund national development therefore forced the state to reach to out to private investors inside Syria and throughout the Arab world.

In reaching out to the private sector, the state put itself in an awkward position, having to reconcile its socialist orientations with those of capitalism. The state ideology has long considered the bourgeoisie its main enemy, depicted as a product of the colonial legacy. To now argue otherwise would necessitate a serious ideological rethinking, potentially leading to the fragmentation of the Ba'ath party, the institution in charge of state politics and its ideological underpinnings. In the Marxist-Leninist framework, this was one reason the Ba'ath party failed to achieve full totalitarian control of Syria's society^[33] or develop as an institution independent of state interference. In the final analysis the party was ineffective, trapped in ideological dogma and self-serving political agendas.

The reliance on private capital forced the state to implement a mixed economy which produced a new social structure with vested interest in the maintaining the status quo. To attract much needed foreign aid and investment, the state opted for a series of economic liberalization policies in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. This enabled the state to funnel most of its funds and some of the external aid to the public sector including the military. At the same time, the state contracted the implementation of many developmental projects to private entrepreneurs, businesses, and military officers. But the absence of accountability and transparency in awarding contracts resulted in widespread corruption, most of which benefited the politicians and military. Through a system of patronage, the state became an instrument in the hands of the dominant political and economic class whose needs converged in such a way that forced them to forge an alliance otherwise impossible. The political elite, mostly high ranking Alawite military officers, was solely in charge of contracts, licenses, and foreign trade. By virtue of this monopoly they accumulated wealth through embezzlement, bribery, and corruption. Simultaneously, the economic elite, largely Sunni, needed political power, and so used its newfound relations with the Alawite elites to acquire the political influence needed to remain economically vibrant.

In terms of information technology, Syria ranks below average in the Arab world; less than one percent of Syria's population has access to the Internet whereas the Arab world average is 1.06 percent. Syria is considered among the least Internet penetrated countries, placing it with the

likes of Yemen, Iraq, and Libya, and far behind Lebanon and the UAE with 10 and 30 percent respectively. Accordingly Syria faces serious problems developing its technological sector.

Other indicators show slim improvement for Syria's technological advancement. For example, student enrollment in scientific fields at the university level is very low: in 1990-1995 only 2 percent enrolled in those disciplines.^[34] In comparison, in Korea that figure is around 20 percent. This means that the Syrian universities are not producing the much needed human resources for the development of the country. This lack of interest in the sciences is also reflected in scientific innovation, as the Arab Human Development Report noted. The number of patents registered in the United States for Syrian companies and individuals is a meager ten against 16,328 for Korea and 7,652 for Israel during 1980-2000.

This only suggest that Syria has a long way to go before it could reach any sort of technological development to be a real threat to the United States or its regional allies. Critics argue that Syria's military and economic weaknesses are the reason its will seek to develop nuclear weapons and acquire WMD. But as mentioned earlier that, contradicts the Syrian leadership's pragmatic approach to international affairs.

Leadership

Syria's leadership has pursued a principled foreign policy built around deeply rooted philosophical orientations and molded to conform to the realities of its region. Syrian leaders view national security from a pragmatic perspective, dictated by realism more than idealism. Thus, it is highly unlikely that the current Syrian leadership will engage in policies causing the United States or its allies (Israel and Turkey) to retaliate in ways detrimental to Syria's national interest. Most likely Syria will adapt to conditions it cannot change. In this instance, if one thing is sure about the reconfiguration of the Middle East, it is that Syria will find a way to work within the new existing conditions.

Arab Nationalism

Syria's foreign policy has always been identified with Arab nationalism, an ideology that holds that the Arab world is historically a single unit and that its contemporary makeup of 22 states is artificial. In their political discourses, Syrian leaders have been notorious in making speeches that appeal to the Arab psyche. For example, Arabs felt proud when Syrian Foreign Minister Farooq Al Sharaa delivered a speech in Washington D.C., standing next to President Clinton and former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak after yet another failed attempt to restart the peace process. Al Shara's eloquent delivery and lucid references to Israel's long history of injustices towards the Arabs scored high in many parts of the Arab world. Some thought he gave credence to Arab diplomacy and wished Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had done the same with his meetings in the White House.

But much of that seems to be solely for Arab public consumption. The Syrian leadership's support for Arab nationalism is a rhetorical reaction to Syria's historical disappointments more than a reflection of an Arab nationalistic policy. Western powers betrayed the Syrians in the World War I by not giving them independence in exchange for Syria's support during the war. The Western powers were plotting to partition Greater Syria all along, making it into four separate entities with contemporary Syria surrendering nearly a third of its territory to what would be the countries of Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine/Israel. This generated a wave of popular resistance and condemnations from the Syrian National Congress in 1919, a national Syrian assembly in 1928, and following Ba'ath party declarations.

The Syrians were also disappointed by the reactions of the international community: the League of Nations' endorsement of the partitioning of Greater Syria, the surrendering of Syria's territories

to Turkey, and the UN's role in the Palestinians' dispersion, and the Golan Heights. Moreover, the Syrians resented France and Great Britain for secretly engineering the Sykes-Picot pact which eventually manifested in the carving of Greater Syria, and France for invading Syria, toppling the government of Faisal Ibn Hussein al Hashimi, and later for repeatedly nullifying elections and canceling parliaments because they did not support France's policies. Syria believes that France's actions preempted Syria from growing into a full democracy. Syria was the first Middle Eastern country to hold elections and its parliamentary experience showed a great potential for a future democratic state in Syria.

It is this misfortune of a colonial legacy that drives the Syrian leadership today. Repeated calls for Arab unity and pledges to work towards its realization give legitimacy to a leadership seriously challenged for its oppressive rule and over 40 years of martial law. Time and again, Syrian leaders have used the dismemberment of Greater Syria, the threat of Israel, and now the U.S. as a reminder of why Arabs have to be united.

But Arab nationalism does not seem to drive Syria's foreign policy. Rather, it has been used as an instrument to keep people from uncovering Syria's highly sectarian and discriminatory regime. Ever since Hafez al Assad took office in the early 1970s, Syria's political system has been dominated by Alawites despite their representation of only ten percent of the entire population. As a minority, many Alawites had been groomed by the Ba'ath party and became strong advocates of Arab nationalism, enabling them to be fully integrated with the vast majority of the population. As Shia, Alawites were considered by some Syrians as non-Muslims and consequently were mistreated. In typical Shia fashion, many Alawites have had to hide their true identity. Thus, taking on a secular ideology gave the Alawites a new identity and hid their religious differences.

In foreign policy Syria does not practice Arab nationalism. It makes for good political propaganda with no practical results. The Syrian leadership has been pragmatic in pursuing Syria's national interest most of the time, and has even made bold decisions perceived to be contrary to Arab nationalism.

During Lebanon's civil war, Syria sided with a Maronite-dominated coalition of the Christian Right against a Leftist Arab-Palestinian-Muslim coalition when it appeared that the latter coalition was poised to win. Had that coalition won, it would have placed the Syrian regime in direct confrontation with Israel.

Similarly, Syria supported Iran against Iraq, an Arab country, in the Iran-Iraq war. This was especially troubling for the Gulf State Arabs. The Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) had contributed generously to Syria's national development, providing over \$12 billion in assistance, and had envisioned Syria as a true ally against Iran, which threaten to ignite an Islamic revolution that the GCC leaders could not preempt. But the Syrian leaders were thinking about Syria and nothing else. With Egypt's signing of the Camp David treaty with Israel, Syria felt isolated regionally. Iran, which had just won over the hearts of the Arab masses with its Islamic revolution, presented itself as a legitimate ally against Israel and the United States, and thus Syria had no problem siding with Iran even though it meant betraying an Arab country. In exchange, Iran offered Syria the support it needed to stabilize the regional balance of power, thereby making it less likely that Israel would launch an attack against Syria.

Even when Syria seems to be acting according to Arab nationalism, Syria is pursuing its own national interests. In the second Gulf war, Syria appeared to have returned to the Arab fold when it joined the UN-led coalition to free Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion. To Syria this was an opportunity to re-integrate into the Arab world. Syria expected to repair its relations with the GCC and eventually play the prominent role it once had. True to its words, Syria sent troops to fight against Iraq, and following the liberation of Kuwait, Syria proposed an Arab regional security system in conjunction with Egypt and the GCC states to protect the region. This system, known as the Damascus Declaration, was designed to replace the Western forces.

Additionally, Syria had to strengthen its relations with the West in the New World Order. Syria had lost major Eastern European and Soviet allies. With the U.S. planning for a resolution of the Middle East conflict while preparing for the war against Iraq, Syria did not want to risk antagonizing the U.S. by not participating in the war. Instead, Syria used the opportunity to rejuvenate its ties with the Palestinians, Jordan, and Lebanon, making sure they coordinated efforts to reach a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Finally, by participating in the Gulf war alongside UN coalition forces, the United States (and tacitly Israel) tolerated the Syrian presence in Lebanon. This earned Syria a legitimate presence in Lebanon and the opportunity to influence Lebanese politics at far greater degree than before.

Syria's pragmatic approach is also seen in its domestic politics. Syrian leaders have proven that they are not ideologues, but shrewd practitioners of realpolitik. A telling example is how Hafez al Assad tried to reconcile socialism and privatization—two contradictory policies to development. In the early 1970s the regime initiated land reform to earn legitimacy with the rural population, but soon realized this move was counterproductive. The redistribution of land alienated landlords and investors—the most potent class in the agrarian sector—driving production downhill. Realizing its mistake, the leadership proceeded to establish a partnership with the bourgeoisie, urging them to invest in their assigned land and state farms. This eased the burden of rural development on the state, enabling it to save investment cost and turn to bigger agrarian projects, including hydraulics and irrigation.^[35]

Syria's political approach has been consistently pragmatic. Consequently, a scenario in which Syria acquires nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons and uses them against the United States or its regional allies is unlikely.

Syria and Terrorism

Syria's pragmatism in foreign policy can also be seen in its relationships with Palestinian and Lebanese organizations that the United States considers terrorist. In both these instances, the Syrian leadership has thought first and foremost about Syria's national interest and has treated these groups more as competitors or clients than allies. The key for successful relationships with these groups, as demonstrated historically, has been their eagerness and willingness to play by Syrian rules while in Syria's territory. Short of this, Syrians have taken offense. In an interview to an independent Arab newspaper Vice-President Abd al Halim Khaddam best describes Syria's approach to the Palestinians. Addressing the issue of the Oslo agreement that the Palestinians signed without Syria's knowledge, Khaddam appeared patronizing and uncharacteristically uncaring:

"When Arafat came to us in Damascus after the signing of the Oslo Accords, we told him that we could not agree with him but we would not fight him. We said to him that he had to taken a decision independently, Allah be with him, and that he had to resolve the problem himself. However, we warned him that the path he had chosen was a dead-end that would bring no good to him or to the Palestinian people.

Were I to conduct the negotiations in Arafat's place, I would be ready to face differences of opinion with all the world, but never would allow myself to arrive at a difference with Syria. What cards does Arafat hold? It would have been appropriate for our brothers in the PLO to have drawn on the moral, political, and practical and might of Syria in the negotiating arena. Furthermore, they should have understood that if there is no peace between Syria and Israel, then there be no peace in the region at all... [The Palestinians] went to Oslo without anyone's knowledge, and therefore we cannot agree to the terms of the Oslo Accords."^[36]

According to Ghada Hashim Talhami, Hafez Al Assad was among the first Arab leaders to use Arab nationalism as a means to bring Palestinian guerrillas under Syria's supervision.[37] Syria's strategic vulnerability in the Golan Heights dictated that they be cautious in their approach, and not to give Israel a justification to attack Syria. Consequently, Syria leaders pressed for control of the Palestinian guerrillas' activities in their territory and demanded that the guerrillas' seek permission from Syria's military before taking action against Israel. Arafat himself was imprisoned by Syria for allegedly failing to abide by such rules. Reportedly, Assad told Arafat that he did not represent the Palestinians more than he (Assad) did. Following the 1974 Syria-Israel disengagement agreement, Syria barred Palestinian guerrillas from using Syrian territory to attack Israel. Simultaneously, the Syrians began forming their own factions within the Palestinian movement to further their control.

Syria handled Lebanese guerrillas similarly. Initially Syria assisted in the creation of Hizbollah, allowing the organization access to Iranians in the Bekaa Valley. But soon Syria pressed for control. Syria has raised strong objections against the establishment of a Shia state by Hizbollah or any other organization in Lebanon. Consequently, Syria has fought hard to curb Hizbollah's influence in the Lebanese system, but consistent with its realistic view of the region, Syria has been careful not to undermine Hizbollah's potential threat to Israel. Accordingly, Syria has exempted Hizbollah from disarming in the South, as per the Taief Agreement which ended the Lebanese civil war in 1989, and the Treaty of Brotherhood, Co-operation, and Co-ordination signed between Lebanon and Syria in 1991.[38] This enabled Hizbollah to continue to lead the struggle against Israel from Southern Lebanon. All the while, the Lebanese army, backed by Syria, was taking control of the rest of Lebanon.[39]

Conclusion

The impression that the United States is projecting of Syria as a dominant and interventionist state has not been confirmed empirically. Syria's role in the Middle East has been determined more or less by its geography, economy, military, and the political orientations of its leaders. Syria's stretched borders, close proximity to Israel, poor economic condition, and weak military capabilities have all forced the Syrian leaders to scale down many of their national aspirations—including the realization of Greater Syria—and to impose strict control on transnational organizations whose activities against Israel are deemed potentially threatening to Syria's national interest. But as calculating as they are, Syria's leaders must also be aware that exercising caution may not be enough to deter threats, and thus, they might have resorted (or may resort) to acquiring WMD if for nothing else than to secure their own protection. Whether or not Syria will use such weapons against others is debatable. What is certain, however, is that using WMD would be inconsistent with Syria's well established political approach.

About the Author

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