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SYRIA AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

No war is possible without Egypt, and no peace is possible without Syria.

—Henry Kissinger

Introduction

As a frontline state resisting Israeli aggressions and expansionist policies and as a party to all major political developments in the Arab world, Syria occupies a key strategic position in the Middle East politics. Syria is one of the few Arab countries that is committed to radical policy orientations, pursues firm and uncompromising attitude toward Israel and believes in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state through arms struggle. This Syrian posture, although often criticised by different quarters, helped the Syrian leadership to seriously influence the course of political developments in the Arab world. In fact, in the last decade through her involvements in the Arab political arena Syria has emerged as strong power-broker in the Middle East.

In this backdrop a review of the Syrian foreign policy posture within the given domestic and external milieu will be of paramount importance. The present article which is an attempt at that direction, is divided into two main parts. Part one deals with the domestic political setting of Syria, her place in broader Arab political scene, the general frame of her external posture, and for that matter highlights of her relations with the superpowers. Part two then

analyses the Syrian position vis-a-vis the major political issues/events in the Middle East.

I

Although, Syria is an inventory of the 20th century, the territory of modern Syria was occasionally ruled by mighty Kings and Emperors through a long checkered history. Situating on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, approximately at a point where Asia Africa and Europe converge, Greater Syria had always played an important role in the socio-economic life of the Arab world. As an ancient city and a citadel of Arab culture and civilization, Damascus was the centre of Arab world for many centuries.¹

Syria became an independent state in 1946 with the withdrawal of French troops but the Syrians did never forgive the French who created modern Lebanon by carving from Syria the Christian region around mount Lebanon, the predominantly Muslim Bekka Valley and the coastal cities of Tripoli, Sidon, Beirut and Tyre. After independence Syria experienced one of the severest internal political turmoils in the Arab world. The modern history of Syria is a saga of coups and countercoups. Because of the resultant domestic political instability in the 1940s and 1950s Syria was, more or less, isolated in the Arab world and failed to play any effective role in inter-Arab politics. In 1963 the Arab Socialist Resurrection (Baath) Party overthrew President Nazem Koudsi and seized power in Damascus.² A serious rift followed in the Baathist Military Committee and two rival groups, one headed by Hafez al-Assad and another by Salah Jadid fought for power. Soon this rivalry was not only confined to the party military organization but seriously affected the major civilian party institutions of the Baath.³ The Assad/Jadid rivalry took

1. For details about the Syrian history, see, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 17, 15th Edition, 1978, pp. 951-970.
2. Nobeel A. Khoury, "The Pragmatic Trend in Inter-Arab Politics", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Summer 1982, p. 374.
3. Nikolas Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, (Croom Helm, London), 1981, pp. 51-66.

a new momentum after the Arab military defeat in 1967, partly due to differences of opinion over military, foreign and socio-economic policies which were then to be pursued.⁴ The moderate group headed by Hafez al-Assad, the then Defence Minister, showed strong Arab nationalist leanings, demanded top priority for the armed struggle against Israel and supported strong Arab military force even at the cost of Syria's socialist transformation. It also advocated for political and military cooperation and coordination with all Arab states irrespective of their political colours, as long as this would be at the interest of common Arab struggle. The socialist oriented group, on the other hand, rejected the idea of political and military cooperation with the 'reactionary, rightist or pro-Western' regimes and was in favour of closer relations with the Soviet Union and other communist countries for the benefit of the socialist transformation in Syria.⁵

The long struggle for power ended in 1970 with Hafez al-Assad's assumption of Presidency, but since he represented the minority Alawite group,⁶ the new leadership initially faced formidable challenges both from internal and external sources. However, the effective domestic policy formulated by the government, the aura of economic success, the unprecedented cohesiveness of the ruling group and after all the adroit leadership of the President helped Assad to stabilize the situation in the country. His government has ruled the country for a period of one and a half decade in the turbulent atmosphere of the Middle East and has been successful in mitigating the underlying sources of instability in the country. The comparative political stability served as the foundation for formulating and implementing an active foreign policy which, in turn, enhanced the prestige of Syria in the Arab world as well as in the comity of nations.

4. *al-Ba'th* (Syria), 12 February 1967.

5. Nikolas Van Dam, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

6. The Alawites constitute only 12 percent of the total population of Syria. The other main religious groups are ; Sunni 70 percent, Christians 13 percent, Druzes 4 percent and Ismailis 0.5 percent. For details see, *South*, August 1983, p. 21.

The assumption of President Hafez al-Assad to power in Syria coincided with some major events and changes in the Arab world which seriously influenced or acted as determining factors in Syrian external posture. The Third Arab Israeli war, the Israeli occupation of a vast Arab territory and emergence of Israel as the strongest power in the region gave new thought to the Arab leaders in formulating their policies toward the broader Arab-Israeli conflict. Secondly, the political transformations in Yemen, Iraq and Libya radically changed the existing political balance in the region with long term implications for Arab political developments. Thirdly, the death of President Nasser, the founder of Arab nationalism, followed by 'open door' policy of President Sadat had also influenced Syrian foreign policy making. Fourthly, thanks to the oil-boom in 1973, the oil rich Arab countries which emerged as a major economic centre extended huge financial aid to the frontline states, including Syria which acted as an important foreign policy factor. Finally, expulsion of the PLO from Jordan and the growing internal complexities in Lebanon were also taken in serious consideration in designing the Syrian Arab policy. In such a backdrop, the main objectives of Syrian external policy

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in early 1970s were; i) to regain the lost Golan Heights in coordinating her policies with other Arab countries ii) to organise and lead the Arab radical forces and thus to emerge as a strong partner in Arab politics iii) to increase her leverage over the moderate Arab states and to ensure more financial aids from them iv) to exert sufficient influence over the PLO with a view to controlling the organization and using it as a bargaining card in intra-Arab politics v) to keep a close watch on the political developments of Lebanon and if possible to control over the situation there. And finally vi) to pretend

the Arab leadership role and to seek a solution of the Middle East conflict that can best serve the Syrian interest.

With the setting up of foreign policy goals and objectives toward the Middle East the Syrian leadership also worked out its policy toward the superpowers. Syria is most probably the only Arab state that, on occasions, was able to successfully use the superpower rivalries for her own interest. As *Time* commented in December 1983, "Assad has forced both the US and the Soviet Union to become more deeply and more dangerously entwined in the Middle East muddle than perhaps either superpower would like".⁷

Although the regime of Hafez al-Assad, with its socialist and secularist slogans, was widely considered as pro-Moscow, the Syrians always tried to keep a distance from the Soviet Union. Syria was interested to receive more and more sophisticated arms from the Soviet Union, but at the same time was, apparently, not ready to accept Soviet influence in the region. In 1970s the Soviets signed a series of Friendship Treaties with the Arab countries but the Syrian leadership soon found them inconsistent with its foreign policy goals and cautiously evaded the systematic Soviet pressure. However, with the political changes in the Middle East and the deteriorating relation with Israel, in 1980 the Syrians were agreed to formalize their ties with the Soviet Union by signing a Friendship Treaty with the hope of getting more military aid and to enhance the deterrance value of their relationship.⁸ Syria always tried to convince the Soviet leadership that she could serve the Soviet interests with the same degree and gravity as the Israelis are serving the US interests in the region and favoured of signing a formal security agreement with a view to involving Moscow more directly into the Middle East conflict.⁹ But the Soviet Union seemed to be reluctant to accept the Syrian proposition and to put all her eggs to the Syria basket which might be

7. *Time*, 19 December 1983, p. 10.

8. Itamar Rabinovich, "The Foreign Policy of Syria : Goals, Capabilities, Constraints and Options", *Regional Security in the Middle East*, edited by Charles Tripp, (IISS, London) 1984, p. 42.

9. *Arabia : The Islamic World Review*, December 1984, pp. 14-16.

too risky and dangerous. She rather preferred to develop her relations with other moderate Arab states. Furthermore, there are number of issues of contention in Syrian-Soviet relations, the Soviets neither supported the Syrian policy in Lebanon in 1976 and her attitude toward the PLO, nor did they approve the Syrian flexibility in negotiations with the US.

Nonetheless, since the main Soviet objective is to see Syria as a strong Soviet foothold with a view to encountering growing US influence and since at present Moscow has no reliable partner in the region to replace Syria, the Soviets will hardly have any option than to support the regime of Hafez al-Assad. On the other hand, the Syrians, being fully aware of their leverage on Moscow and the constraints of Soviet policy in the Middle East, are obviously interested in getting more benefits from Kremlin at the cost of least leverage granted to the Soviets.

In regard to her relation with the other superpower the Syrian leadership seems to be moderate, flexible and at the same time tough and uncompromising. Although, the diplomatic relation with the US was severed in 1967 in protest of total US support to Israel, it was reestablished in 1974 during President Nixon's visit to Damascus.¹⁰ The signing of troops disengagement agreement with Israel in 1974 and support to the Lebanese Christians were observed by the US as positive trends in Syrian foreign policy but Washington failed to develop a cohesive and consistent policy toward Syria. In fact, Syria appeared to be a neglected factor in US Middle East policy formulation and US Administration tried to attain the strategic objective and diplomatic goals with the help of its allies in the region by-passing Syria. Even the Reagan peace plan announced in September 1982 did not mention anything about Syria or occupied Golan Heights. However, with the new political developments in the Arab world, particularly with the strengthening of Syrian position in Lebanon and the continuous guerrilla attacks on US installations a major shift in

10. *Time*, 19 December 1983, p. 14.

US policy was observed and the US recognised the Syrian legitimate interest in the region.¹¹

In spite of strong US criticism of Syrian policy and even adoption of retaliatory measures against her at times, the Syrian leadership was not in favour of blocking the negotiation talks, rather it welcomed the US mediation efforts and expressed willingness to continue dialogue with the US.¹² On occasions, the Syrians seem to be cooperative and ready to give some concessions to the US, but at the same time they have always tried to convince Washington that the road to peace in the Middle East go through Damascus.

II

Since 1970 Syria has been actively involved in all major political developments in the region and her Middle East policy is mainly guided by her perceived interests. So, for an objective analysis of Syrian Middle East policy it should be viewed from the Syrian positions vis-a-vis the major issues/events in the region and their possible implications.

The Moderate Arab States : Although, Syria tried to maintain normal ties with the moderate Arab states, her relation with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was always tense and uneasy. The two neighbouring Arab countries concentrated troops along the borders and was in the verge of clashes on a number of occasions.¹³ In 1970 in protest of Jordan's expulsion of the PLO Syria closed her border with Jordan, but it was a temporary event and soon the two countries were able to mend fences and to improve their relations. In 1974 the two countries coordinated their customs policies which facilitated the movements of goods and people across the common borders.¹⁴ Even the two countries agreed to coordinate some aspects

11. *South*, November 1983, p. 20.

12. *Newsweek*, 19 December 1984, p. 21.

13. Christopher S. Raj, "Recent Syria-Jordan Tension", *Strategic Analysis*, (IDSA, New Delhi), Vol. IV, No. 10, January 1981, p. 478.

14. Nobeel A. Khoury, *op. cit.* p. 378.

of their internal policies, a joint military manoeuvre was conducted in December 1975 and regular bilateral visits of heads of state and top ranking officials became a common phenomenon between the two countries.¹⁵ Such good neighbourly relations between the two countries earned in early 1970s were, however, short-lived and were eventually evaporated by the heat of Arab debates which led to renewal of mutual rivalries, personality clash and antagonism. The Syria-Jordanian relation again faced a serious challenge in 1980 when Syria accused Jordan of supporting the Muslim-Brotherhood—the fanatic religious group who reportedly were trying to overthrow the regime of Hefez al-Assad and began to mass about 30,000 troops along with the Jordanian border.¹⁶ The Gulf War and the Palestinian cause are the most contentious issues in Syria-Jordanian relation. From the very beginning Syria supports Iran in the Gulf War, while Jordan is an active supporter of Iraq and their antagonistic positions often reflected in their bilateral relations. Syria also strongly criticised the PLO-Jordanian negotiations because the Syrian leadership was afraid that any sort of rapprochement between PLO and Jordan by-passing Syria would increase King Hossein's leverage in intra-Arab politics leaving the Syrians in an isolated position. It may be noted, however, that although the parties differ considerably in their approach to various issues in the Middle East, the core problem in Syria-Jordanian relations seems to be personal antipathy, mutual rivalries and struggle for control over the PLO.

Although, the Baathist regime of Syria is strongly critical of the pro-West conservative policy of moderate Arab states including Saudi Arabia, she always cautiously and carefully avoids any direct confrontation with them, rather prefers to maintain a status-quo because for her economic development and for paying the bills of new armaments she urgently needs the financial aid from the oil rich Arab states. Only in 1983 Syria received at least \$ 1.2 billion of economic

15. Walid W. Kazziha, *The Palestine in Arab Dilemma*, (Croom Helm, London), 1977, p. 57.

16. Christopher S. Raj, *op. cit.*, p. 477.

aid from the Arab sources and only Saudi share was about \$ 800 million. According to a report, during 1982-1983 Syria received about \$ 6 billion worth of military aid from Saudi Arabia.¹⁷ Besides, economic aid, the moderate Arab states particularly Saudi Arabia played significant role in easing the tensions between Syria and Jordan in 1980, in defusing the crisis in the Bekka Valley in 1981 and in disengaging

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the in fighting groups in Beirut in 1984 by her active mediation efforts.¹⁸ And Syria always welcomed the Saudi peace missions and cooperated with them.

The oil-rich Arab countries, on their part, inspite of their many dislikings to the pro-Soviet radical regime of Hafez al-Assad, do not intend to deteriorate relations with Syria, rather prefer to maintain a consistent relation with her for a number of reasons. (i) As already mentioned, Syria is, in fact, the only frontline Arab state that is still in a state of war with Israel, strongly criticising Israeli aggression in the Arab world and ready to confront the zionist state militarily. (ii) The Arab Gulf countries are convinced that their enmity with Syria will bring the regime in Damascus more closer to Moscow. (iii) Since the moderate Arab states are worried about the growing radical elements in the region, they cannot afford to allow Syria to become more radical which is pregnant with transcending radical influence over the region. And it was recognised by various Arab leaders from time to time. As Prince Talal said, "Saudi Arabia cannot ignore Syria. It is the heart of the Arab world. If we cut the aid to the Syrians.....They are going farther to the other superpower".¹⁹

17. *Arabia; The Islamic World Review*, June 1984, pp. 70-71.

18. *Guardian*, (London), 11 January 1984, p. 1.

19. *Newsweek*, 4 July 1983, p. 9.

This has put Syria in an advantageous position from where she has been able to successfully manoeuvre her external behaviour. Whenever she finds any Arab move to suit the interest of Damascus she supports it, but at the same time while if the same other wise it is safely rejected. Syria, for example, outrightly denounced the 8-point Saudi peace plan, which called for implicit recognition of Israel and refused to attend the Arab League Summit held in 1981, but just after one year in 1982 the Syrians seemed to have no problem to attend the Summit and to endorse the historic Arab League peace plan very similar to the Saudi plan.²⁰

The Palestinian Issue : Palestine has always been at the centre of focus of intra-Arab politics. Whenever the intra-Arab rivalries intensified the Palestinian cause gained prominence, the Arab leaders tried to control the PLO with a view to adding their prestige and position and to use it as a leverage in their relations with other Arab nations. Syria was not an exception of that power game.

Syria's relations with the Palestinians appear to be ambiguous and inconsistent. After the Third Arab-Israeli war in 1967 many Palestinians took shelter in Syria like in other Arab countries. The condition of the Palestinian refugees in Syria were better, the government set up the Palestine Arab Refugee Institution and provided food, clothing, housing and educational facilities to them.²¹ But the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria were under strict police control to a degree not found in Lebanon or Jordan because Syria was afraid that Palestinian attacks on Israel would drag her into a war at a time and place not according to her choice.

The expulsion of the PLO guerillas including the whole of its leadership from Jordan in 1970 created an advantageous situation for Syria to be more involved in the issue. As the Syria-Jordanian relations improved soon, King Hossein wanted to play the PLO card

20. For details about Saudi and Arab League peace plans see, *Kessing's Contemporary Archives*, Vol. XXIX, 1983, pp. 31912 and 32037.

21. Pamela Ann Smith, *Palestine and the Palestinians 1973-1983*. (Croom Helm, London), 1983, p. 154.

through Syria and the Syrian leadership tried to enhance its position by playing a broker's role, but the move was strongly criticised by the PLO. Syria reportedly cracked down on Fatah's movement in her territory, the Voice of Palestine radio station was closed down and many PLO leaders were either harrassed or arrested. The Syrians were also said to have closed Fatah's training bases in Syria.²²

The Syrian-PLO relations suffered another serious set-back during the Lebanese civil war when Syria, being afraid of a possible Muslim domination in Lebanon, came forward to help the Lebanese Christians. However, with the changing Syrian policy, the PLO guerillas and Syrian troops were able to fight shoulder to shoulder in South Lebanon against their common enemies until Israeli invasion in June 1982. But Syria's inactiveness in the Lebanese war and signing of a separate ceasefire agreement with Israel left the Palestinians in a state of uncertainty in Beirut. In July 1982 when the situation worsened and the seize of Beirut was at its closest, the PLO sent appeal to President Assad to intervene but failed to receive any satisfactory reply²³ and they had no option than to leave Beirut.

Syria, with about 500,000 Palestinians and at least six training camps in her territory, obviously expected that after Beirut the only possible place where the Palestinians could move was Syria. But PLO preferred to shift its headquarters to Tunis because the PLO leadership was quite aware of the fact that in Damascus they would be under strict government control from where they would be able only to make military statements but not to undertake any military operation.²⁴ The noted analyst Fouad Ajami commenting on PLO's position said that the Palestinians realized that journey to Damascus would make the Palestinian nationalist bid an arm of the Syrian regime and would be deadly and stultifying.²⁵

22. "Palestinian Impasse; Arab Guerillas and International Terror", edited by Lester A. Sobel, New York 1977, p. 156.

23. *South*, August 1983, p. 22.

24. *Newsweek*, 5 July 1982, p. 23.

25. Fouad Ajami, "The Shadows of Hell", *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1982, No. 48, p. 103.

Although, Syria welcomed the radical PLO groups along with about 4000 guerillas, President Assad was seriously offended at PLO's decision and his anger further roused at the end of 1982 when Yasser Arafat started talks with King Hossain to find out a possible negotiated settlement of the Palestinian issue. Syria denounced the talks and was reportedly trying to undermine Yasser Arafat's leadership. The personal enmity between Assad and Arafat flared up openly in mid 1983 when the PLO leader was declared *persona non grata*

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and was expelled from Syria.²⁶ Meanwhile, a major uprising took place within the rank of al-Fatah and the rebels supported by Syria were able to expel the Arafat loyalists along with the leadership from Tripoli, Lebanon, in November 1983.

In fact, after expulsion from Tripoli (Lebanon) Yasser Arafat took more moderate policy orientation in regard to the Middle East conflict. He visited Cairo, met President Mubarak and resumed the negotiation talks with Jordan. In February 1985 the two parties signed an agreement for a joint approach to peace and the PLO agreed to participate in any peace talks "within a joint delegation of Jordanian and Palestinian representatives" and to form "confederated Arab state of Jordan and Palestine".²⁷ Syria strongly criticised the move, vowed to block the accord and the Syrian Cabinet decided to "make the foiling of the Arafat-Hossain accord its official policy".²⁸ It appears that the PLO-Jordan accord has already drawn wider Arab attention and by now Yasser Arafat after the 17th Session of the Palestine National Council has reemerged

26. *Newsweek*, 4 July 1983, p. 9.

27. For details see, *International Herald Tribune*, 25 February 1985.

28. *Ibid.*

as the strongest man in the PLO. In these circumstances, with the support of the radical part of the PLO groups whose power base seems to be very weak, Syria appears to be in a more disadvantageous position than ever. Thus the effectiveness of the role of Syria in Arab politics seems to have suffered another setback. But a veteran leader like Hafez al-Assad, with vast experience in Arab politics and with the cherished intention of Arab leadership role will not obviously accept the loss of his Palestine card. Hence he may soon be able to turn the table specially mobilising the PLO radical groups and thus strengthen his position.

Arab-Israeli Conflict : Although the present Arab-Israeli conflict took root in 1948 with the emergence of the Zionist state of Israel. Syria was not directly involved in the conflict until 1967 when Israel occupied 1,150 square kilometers of Syrian Golan Heights. In 1970s main Syrian policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict was to regain her lost territory and to secure her border from Israeli aggression. In 1973 Syria along with Egypt joined the Fourth Arab-Israeli War but instead of recovering the Golan Heights she had to lose a further slice of her territory.²⁹ In fact, after the Fourth Arab-Israeli war Syria advocated for an overall Arab consensus on the conflict, favoured continuing armed struggle and strongly opposed any partial negotiation with Israel. But political observers widely believe that it was more of rhetoric than of any substantive policy. In reality she had also been in favour of a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict though differed from other Arab countries in terms of procedure. As an evidence, only two months following Egypt's signing of disengagement agreement with Israel in 1974 Syria went ahead to sign an analogical agreement with Israel in Geneva.³⁰

Meanwhile, the cornerstone of Assad's policy was to attain strategic parity with Israel with a view to withstanding Israeli attacks independent of help from any Arab country. Accordingly, Syria maintained

29. *South*, August 1983, p. 21.

30. Nobeel A. Khoury, *op.cit.* P. 381.

her arms build up and continued to strengthen her military installations in the Bekka Valley with the help of the Soviet Union.

The Israeli annexation of Golan Heights in December 1981 was a severe blow to Syria. For a number of reasons Syria had to limit her reaction to this event to only protests raised at the UN Security Council. The country was rife with political unrest; more than 30,000 troops were involved in Lebanon and because of her support to Iran in the Gulf War Syria was in a weaker position in the Arab world. The international atmosphere was also unfavourable and because of her support to the communist regime in Afghanistan Syria was in a nearly isolated position in the Islamic world. Moreover, because of this on-going Polish crisis, the Syrian cause failed draw the due international sympathy.

A close scrutiny of Syrian Policy and actions vis-a-vis Israel suggests that on the one hand, she pretends to be the vanguard of Arab struggle against Israel and the champion of the Arab cause, on the other hand, she seems to avoid direct confrontations with Israel. Since 1967 Syria has been maintaining a consistant relation with Israel and so far Syria never violated the ceasefire agreements signed with Israel and the Israelis had the most peaceful border with Syria³¹. Even many Israeli Generals are convinced that if Syria would deploy her troops in South Lebanon Israeli northern border would be more secure than that under the control of the Lebanese army. During the Lebanese war in 1982 it also appeared that both the parties fought limited war, carefully avoided heavy casualties and promptly and successfully exchanged the POW's. Although Israel criticises President Assad as 'ruthless', 'crude' and 'antisemitic', at the same time the Israelis seem to have a sense of confidence on Assad. As one senior Israeli officer said, "He (Assad) can say 'no' three times, and it adds up to a 'yes'. You can make a deal with him".³²

The Lebanese Crisis : The involvement in Lebanon is one of the crucial factors in Syrian foreign policy. Syrians did not recognise

31. *Arabia ; The Islamic World Review*, June 1984, p.68.

32. *Newsweek*, 25 October 1982, p.13

the creation of Lebanon as an independent state and had continued territorial claims over the tiny Mediterranean state. Since 1970 Syria took enhanced interest in Lebanon and closely observed the political developments there. Meanwhile, the political situation in Lebanon gradually became complicated with the infightings among the Muslims, Christians and the Palestinians. The Civil War broke out in 1975 and Syria became directly involved in Lebanon along with her 459 tanks and about 20,000 soldiers.³³ Syrian presence in Lebanon was later on legalised by a decision of the Arab League under which Syrian army was turned into a part of the 30,000 Arab Deterrent Force (ADF) in Lebanon. As the other participating countries soon withdrew their troops from the ADF, only the Syrians were left. But gradually Syria, instead of peacekeeping, turned into a major party to the conflict and, taking the advantage of the political weakness of Lebanon, controlled the the situation there.

Syria has two main objectives in Lebanon : First, to keep Lebanon in the domain of Syrian influence if not merging it under Greater Syria and to try to make the Lebanon government dependent on Syria and for that matter Syria always preferred a weaker government in Lebanon. Syria can not afford to accept the emergence of Muslim dominated strong Lebanon at the cost of Christian influence there. In fact, Syria tends to link her own security with that of Lebanon and it was often expressed by Syrian leadership. "Syria could not approve something which was detrimental to Lebanon's independence and hence harmful to Syria's security and interests".³⁴ And, as one Syrian official said, "Lebanon is the one issue on which any Syrian President would be prepared to take the greatest risk".³⁵ Secondly, after the signing of the Egypt-Israeli separate peace treaty the Syrians were convinced that it would hardly be possible for them to recover Golan Heights from Israeli occupation by using force. Hence by strengthening its position

33. For details see, Karen Rasler, "A Dynamic Analysis of the Syrian Intervention in Lebanon" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.27, No.3, September 1983, pp.421-456.

34. *al-Ba'ith* (Syria), 8 May 1983,

35. *Time*, 19 December 1983, p. 11.

in Lebanon the Syrians hope to use the leverage as a bargaining card in negotiating the regaining of the lost Golan Heights or at least to bring back the issue at the negotiating table.

The Gulf war : Syrian support to the Islamic revolution in Iran and her subsequent alliance with Iran in the Gulf war was, in fact, a new phenomenon in the Middle East politics. The alliance between the secular Baathist regime of Syria and the Islamic fundamentalist regime of Iran raised an obvious question why Syria, a member of the Arab League and an ally of the Soviet Union took the Iranian side against her fellow Arab sister Baathist regime of Iraq. Firstly, the Syrian policy toward Iran vis-a-vis the Gulf War was mainly guided by her relation with Iraq. Although, the two Baathist regimes were able to maintain friendly ties in early 1970s and Iraq joined the Fourth Arab-Israeli war in support of Syria, relations between the two fellow Arab nations deteriorated in mid 1970s over the issue of constructing a pipeline through Turkey not through Syria and the water sharing from the Euphrates river.³⁶ The relations were tense and uneasy all through 1970s and reached climax in 1982 when Syria closed the Iraqi oil pipeline as a gesture of support to Iran. The closure of the pipeline cut Iraq's oil exports by 40 percent, reduced her foreign exchange earnings by 25 percent amounting to a loss of about 17 million per-day.³⁷ Syria's action is interpreted as an outcome of Syria's fear of a possible Iraqi victory in the war and the emergence of a powerful Baathist regime in her border. The crisis in their relations however, seems to be derived more from mutual mistrusts, personal antipathy, personality clash and conflicting ambition of both for possible Arab leadership role. Secondly, Syria was always afraid of a possible PLO-Jordanian rapprochement which would undermine her role and curtail the influence over the PLO. On the other hand, the initial strong anti-zionist stand adopted by the new leadership of Iran encouraged Syria and the leadership in Damascus considered Iran as a future ally in the anti-zionist struggle.

36. *The Economist* (London) 26 April 1975.

37. *Middle East Review* 1983, Ninth Edition, p.165

Thirdly, Syria was always critical about the US policy in the region and the new Iranian policy toward the US converged with the Syrian interests. The Syrian leadership also calculated that an alliance with Iran would certainly help to encounter a possible future Iraqi-Saudi-Jordanian axis. Fourthly, since President Assad was a representative of minority Alawite group he was afraid of Sunni majority of Syria and preferred to get support from a Shiite regime like Iran. Finally, Syria wanted to use her linkage with Iran as a leverage in intra-Arab politics. Being the only active Arab supporter of Iran, Syria appears to have designed a sole brokershhip role for herself around the war, indicating that the road to any negotiation with Iran lies through Damascus. At the same time, Syria intends to squeeze maximum economic benefits from the oil-rich Islamic Republic of Iran for whom a friendship with Damascus is also of immense importance in the context of her near isolation in the Arab world.

Concluding Remarks

Although President Assad represents the minority Alawite group and often his regime is criticised as 'ruthless' and repressive', Syria under his leadership has developed a stable political system through his popular programme of Arab nationalism, socio-economic reforms and secularism in public life. Parallel with the achievements in the domestic front Syria has also been able to develop a remarkable foreign policy posture. Although, Syria has established closer ties with Soviet Union, she has also been able to maintain a cautious and consistant pattern of relations with the other Superpower.

At regional level President Assad intends to make his country the citadel of Arab nationalism and to prove himself as the champion of the Arab and the Palestinian cause. In spite of her obvious limitations in terms of manpower and resource potential it appears that in the foreseeable future Syria will continue to play a vital role in the Middle East politics. And as the Syrians claim "in war or peace, other nations (involved in Middle East politics) cannot do without the Syrians".³⁸

38. *Newsweek*, 10 May 1982, p. 20

In her relations with Israel, inspite of occassional flareups it seems that a tacit understanding will prevail and Syria will, in all probability, avoid a direct confrontation with Israel and try to maintain the present status-quo with her.

On the Lebanese issue, under the present circumstances where the Syrian PLO card is at stake (if not lost), Syria will not obviously be ready to give up any of her leverage over Lebanon. She will rather try to use it for regaining her lost Golan Heights, although Israel can hardly be expected to make any meaningful concession on the issue.

As regards the Palestinian issue Syria will try to regain her influence over the PLO, difficult though it appears in the context of the recent PLO-Jordanian Joint Agreement for Peace in the Middle East. The Syrian-PLO relation will, however, be determined by the future course and overall trend of political developments in the Arab world.