

The London School of Economics and Political Science

SYRIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1973–1977
A STUDY OF SECURITY COOPERATION IN REGIONAL CONFLICTS

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*To Caren Joy Siehl, Ph.D., and David Bowen, Ph.D., for their unconditional love, support,
and wisdom throughout this intellectual journey*

DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The United States, a great power, and Syria, a small state, have both been at the heart of the politics of the Middle East since the end of World War II. The systemic conditions of the international system and the shifting politics of the region brought these states into contact and, at times, confrontation, but these interactions never produced a sustained period of security cooperation.

By the beginning of the 1970s, both states had begun to reconsider and reshape their positions in the region. The period from 1973 to 1977 produced a rare period of cooperation between these two states in the case of two regional conflicts: the Arab–Israeli conflict and the Lebanese Civil War. To understand that shift in relations, this thesis explores the question: What accounts for the security cooperation between Syria and the US during this period?

This thesis makes four observations: first, as results of changes in both states' leaderships, *realpolitik*, alongside ideational considerations, became more pronounced in both states' conceptions of their security environment in the Middle East and their relations with one another. Second, while the Cold War was the predominant context for the US's interactions with Syria at the start of the 1970s, interactions between the US and Syria were also shaped by local conditions that emerged after the October War. Third, both states, distrustful of the other's intentions, formed temporary alliances based on short-term common interests. Finally, the regional conflicts themselves introduced circumstances that both strengthened and weakened their security cooperation.

While their security cooperation achieved limited results, their relations established a framework for these two states' subsequent relations. The unresolved issues that emerged from this period of their relations served as the main context for their cooperation and conflict in the following decades, even after the death of Hafiz al-Asad in 2000.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE UNITED STATES AND SYRIA: A NEW BEGINNING?	11
Research Question and Observations	12
Conceptual Framework	14
Literature Review	15
The Arab–Israeli Conflict and the Syrian Peace Track	18
The Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976	21
Sources and Methodology	24
Chapter Overview.....	24
Impact of this Study.....	26

CHAPTER 1

FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING US–SYRIAN RELATIONS:

IDENTITY AND INTERESTS	29
1.1. <i>Realpolitik</i> and the Emergence of Alliances	31
1.2. Are States More Complex? Identity and International Politics	36
1.3. The United States: <i>Realpolitik</i> ?.....	42
1.4. Syria: The Decline of Identity?	46
1.5. Features of International Politics: Identity and Interests in US–Syrian Relations	49

CHAPTER 2

THE CONSOLIDATION OF SYRIAN POWER IN THE ARAB WORLD:

AN ENDURING SECURITY DILEMMA	51
2.1. The Origins of Syria’s Security Dilemma	53
2.1.1. Syria’s identity is inextricably linked with the region’s identity	53
2.1.2. Syria’s geopolitical position in the Middle East.....	56
2.1.3. The Prize of Arab Nationalism: A Period of Instability and Disorder	58
2.2. The Rescue of the Nation-State.....	61
2.2.1. State maximization and leveraging under Hafiz al-Asad’s presidential security state.....	61
2.2.2. Syria’s New Foreign Policy	65
2.2.3. The Centrality of Alliances	67
2.3. Managing Syria’s Security Dilemma	69
2.3.1. Power and Peace Broker: Opportunities and Challenges	69

CHAPTER 3

SYRIA AS A CHALLENGE FOR AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: A MISSING SECURITY ARCHITECTURE.....	73
3.1. A Benevolent Beginning	77
3.3. America Engages Syria: From the End of the Second World War to the Dawn of the Cold War.....	78
3.4. Syria and the Eisenhower Doctrine	81
3.5. The 1957 Crisis: America Confronts Syria	84
3.6. The Six-Day War and the Birth of the American-Israeli Special Relationship	87
3.7. A Temporary Victory.....	92

CHAPTER 4

BLACK SEPTEMBER, 1970: SYRIA AND THE US ENCOUNTER A CRISIS IN JORDAN.....	93
4.1. A New Leadership in the White House.....	94
4.2. Defining America's Interests: A Strategy of Limits.....	96
4.3. Realpolitik, the Soviet Union, and Identity.....	99
4.4. Superpower Détente, Triangular Diplomacy, and the Nixon Doctrine	101
4.5. A Crisis in Jordan.....	104
4.6. King Hussein and the PLO.....	106
4.7. The View from Washington.....	107
4.8. A Game of Nerves.....	109
4.9. View from Damascus and the Ba'ath Party's Changing Foreign Policy Orientation.....	111
4.10. Syria and Iraq's Limited Intervention.....	115
4.11. Soviet-American tensions	116
4.12. The Israel Option	118
4.13. Asad's Strategic Disengagement and Seizure of Power	120
4.14. Misperceiving a Crisis	122
4.15. 1970's Impact on the Region.....	123

CHAPTER 5

THE GOLAN NEGOTIATIONS: US-SYRIAN RELATIONS AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT	125
5.1. A Broken Security Architecture.....	126

5.1.1.	Nixon and Kissinger’s New Approach: New Circumstances, Old Strategy, New Tactics	127
5.1.2.	Hafiz al-Asad’s War.....	130
5.1.3.	New Perceptions and New Alliances	132
5.2.	Syria’s Refusal to go to Geneva.....	136
5.3.	Disengagement I	138
5.4.	Nixon’s Last Engagement and the Normalization of Relations	145
5.5.	Out of Step with the Step-by-Step Approach.....	147
5.6.	Engaging Jordan.....	149
5.7.	Egypt First and then Syria: A Partial, but not Full, Withdrawal	150
5.8.	A Missed Peace.....	160

CHAPTER 6

THE US ACQUIESCES TO SYRIA’S INTERVENTION IN LEBANON : US–SYRIAN RELATIONS AND LEBANON’S CIVIL WAR OF 1975–1976

6.1.	Syria’s Relations with Lebanon, Autumn 1975 to Spring 1976.....	166
6.1.1.	Syria’s Conception of its Role in Lebanon.....	166
6.1.2.	Syria’s Confessional Diplomacy: April–December 1975	169
6.1.3.	Engagement with the Maronites.....	176
6.1.4.	Syria’s More Assertive Posture: December 1975–May 1976	179
6.1.5.	Breaking with the LNM	183
6.2.	The US and Syria find Common Ground in Lebanon.....	186
6.2.1.	America’s Quiet Diplomacy: Autumn 1975 through Spring 1976.....	186
6.2.2.	Red Lines and American Mediation: March–May 1976	192
6.2.3.	A Green Light? Syria’s Intervention and American and Israeli Acquiescence	196
6.2.4.	Resistance, Attrition, and a Settlement: June–October 1976.....	199
6.2.5.	The US acquiesces to Syria’s role in Lebanon	203
6.2.6.	The Storms on the Horizon	205

CONCLUSION

UNEXPECTED COOPERATION: US AND SYRIA	207
Theoretical and Empirical Contributions.....	209
Areas of Further Research	218
A Final Note	219

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Table of Interviewees 220
Archival Material 222
Bibliography 237

INTRODUCTION

THE UNITED STATES AND SYRIA: A NEW BEGINNING?

The United States and Syria have both been at the heart of the International Relations of the modern Middle East since the end of the Second World War. By the beginning of the 1970s, the United States was confronting an unsustainable security architecture in the Levant that neither secured nor advanced its position either regionally or in the wider international system. Israel's victory in 1967 had ensured that the region enjoyed neither peace nor stability. Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger, who was variously their national security advisor and secretary of state, sought to rebalance and recalibrate America's identity and interests so that the United States could more effectively compete against the Soviet Union in regions of the developing world, including the Middle East.

As a small power, Syria had been an active actor in the politics of the region. Before the consolidation of the Syrian state under Hafiz al-Asad, Syria had been the prize of other regional powers. Regional states sought to advance their interests by exerting their control and influence in Syria in their regional balance of power equations, as the country was unable to assert itself geopolitically and was challenged by an irredentist identity. However, by the early 1970s Asad's rule was allowing Syria to more effectively assert itself in its regional environment. In a rupture with his predecessors, on coming to power Asad sought to pragmatically balance his country's wider Arab identity with its statist strategic interests in pursuit of his country's foreign policy and to confront his state's decades-old security dilemma.

By the beginning of the 1970s, the regional and international politics in the Middle East allowed both of these states to reconsider and reshape their positions in the Middle East. These two states initially encountered one another in the context of confrontation during Black September in 1970 and then the October War of 1973, but the period of 1973 to 1977 produced a rare and surprising period of cooperation. On the eve of 1970, neither country expected that they would be engaged in intensive diplomacy with the other within four years. Both states started that decade viewing one another as natural enemies and obstacles to their regional ambitions. In the Syrian leadership's view, the United States had

consistently supported Syria's central opponent in the region, Israel, and had even meddled in Syria's domestic affairs from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. The United States viewed Syria as an unstable, radical state, aligned with the Soviet Union and intent on destroying Israel.

Inequity was naturally present in their interactions. For the United States, Syria was only one piece of its wider strategic conception of the Middle East. With its history of instability and its alignment with the Soviet Union, Syria was viewed with less importance than Egypt or Israel in American calculations of the regional environment. Despite the active US engagement of Syria after the October War, this relationship was in the background of Kissinger's attempts to reach a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel.

Syria, on the other hand, viewed the United States with a significant degree of scepticism and distrust. While Hafiz al-Asad was open to the potential opportunities that could come from improved relations with the US, he viewed this relationship in very pragmatic terms and had no illusions about what the relationship could ever be. Asad was willing to engage the United States to help advance his goals in the region if the conditions were right. He was well aware of the limits of Syria's position as a small power both materially and geopolitically, and did not hesitate to exploit the bipolarity of the international system to advance his interests.

However, the tumultuous events of the 1970s began to change the two countries' views of one another and created a rare opportunity for security cooperation. In an event considered unfathomable only years earlier — formalizing their new relations — President Nixon, the leader of a superpower, visited Damascus in June 1974. This visit marked the first time in Syria's history that a sitting US president visited the country, and only the second American visit since the visit by John Foster Dulles, an American secretary of state. Nixon's visit also represented one of the first times that American flags, which had previously been absent in Syria, covered the streets of Damascus.

Research Question and Observations

This period of relations between the US and Syria can be viewed, then, as a strategic and structural break in their prior relations, and their new relations had an important impact on the regional and international politics of the Middle East. This thesis explores the question: *What accounts for the security cooperation between Syria and the United States between 1973 and 1977?*

Four observations help explain this new period of security cooperation:

1. As results of changes in both states' leaderships, *realpolitik*, alongside identity and ideational considerations, became more pronounced in both states' conceptions of their security environment in the Middle East and their relations with one another.
2. While the Cold War was the predominant context for the US's interactions with Syria at the start of the 1970s, interactions between the US and Syria were also shaped by local conditions that emerged after the October War of 1973.
3. Both the US and Syria, distrustful of the other's intentions and alignments, cautiously formed temporary alliances based on short-term common interests.
4. The regional conflicts themselves — the Arab–Israeli conflict of 1973–1977 and the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976 — introduced unanticipated circumstances that would both strengthen and weaken their security cooperation at different times.

As much as this period represented a qualitative change in their relations, the limits of this security cooperation also became evident as the events in the region unfolded from 1973 to 1977. For the United States, Kissinger's attempt to alter the security architecture of the Levant succeeded in removing Egypt from conflict with Israel, but left Syria and the Palestinians without a peace settlement. These conditions would exacerbate the already fragile political system in Lebanon and created an altered but weakened security architecture in the region. Syria succeeded in reaching a limited disengagement agreement in 1974, but without securing a second disengagement agreement in 1975 Syria was placed in a more isolated position in the region. As the archival documents from this period show, President Ford and Kissinger made a concerted effort to keep Syria in the peace process with Israel in order to ensure that Syria did not destabilize US attempts to broker a second disengagement on the Sinai. Kissinger did not shy away from misleading President Asad to keep him from spoiling the Egyptian–Israeli disengagement agreement, and by 1975 Asad began to lose trust in Kissinger and Ford as honest brokers.

From interviews with senior Syrian officials, it becomes clear that Damascus' attempts at political mediation in Lebanon failed and necessitated Syrian intervention in the state. As the

American documents show, faced with limited options, President Ford and Henry Kissinger entered into a *fait accompli* with Asad and his intervention in Lebanon. Importantly, Kissinger succeeded in preventing an Israeli intervention in Lebanon. While both states achieved their respective short-term interests in Lebanon by 1977, Syria's inability to stabilize the political system by 1982 led to an Israeli intervention in Lebanon.

It is important, then, to view this period as an important and clear shift in their relations, but also to recognize its continuity with the past, in terms of the areas where their security cooperation could not overcome their differences. The larger currents of their relations, discussed in Chapters 2–4, remained in the background of their new relations during this period.

Conceptual Framework

To better understand this security cooperation between the United States, a great power, and Syria, a small state, identity and interests are applied as conceptual lenses. Theory aids in explanation, but importantly does not act as a source of explanation on its own. Instead, theory is a framework for analysis that brings greater conceptual and analytical clarity to the empirical data of this period. In contrast to traditional literature, where identity and interests are treated as distinct and irreconcilable explanations for state behaviour, this thesis views both these theoretical approaches as applicable to understanding the decision-making of American and Syrian policymakers during this period.

While there is a tendency in International Relations theory to identify a clear explanatory variable to explain a state's behaviour during a particular event, in practice, states are shaped by a multitude of factors, including the strategic environment they find themselves in at the time. Individual theories can shed light on particular aspects of state behaviour, but as a result they cannot capture the entirety of state behaviour. It is important, then, to try not to privilege one theory over another, but instead to employ theory as a conceptual guide to better understand the diverse and variant aspects of a state's behaviour.

In many cases, both identity and interests influence how policymakers perceive and respond to another state's behaviour. A state's interests, as much as its identity, constrain a state from pursuing a course of action in the international system. By isolating one variable over the other, studies of the International Relations of the Middle East often account for some aspects of a state's behaviour, but leave other aspects of their behaviour unaccounted for or unexplored.

Therefore, decisions by American and Syrian policymakers cannot be fully distinguished as purely interests-driven or identity-driven events; instead, state identity and strategic interests inform on a state's behaviour. In some cases, one has more weight than the other, but they both interact in shaping how a state acts in response to a particular set of events. It is important as well to recognize theory's own limitations, and avoid the tendency in International Relations theory literature to predict state behaviour purely on the contours of a particular theory or set of theories.

Literature Review

This study of US–Syrian relations aims to contribute to three important areas of existing literature: the relationship between great powers and small states in the Middle East during the Cold War, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976.

One of the larger issues explored in the literature on the International Relations of the Middle East has been the effort to understand the relationship between great powers and small states in the region. Fred Halliday, one of the preeminent scholars in the field of International Relations, studied and observed the interaction between the international system and the regional sub-system throughout his prolific career. His work, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics, and Ideology*, a summation of his works, provides an overview of his observations of these dynamics.¹

Halliday characterizes the Cold War as a period that had the most significant level of “interaction of global with regional forces” of any period in Middle Eastern history.² He notes that the wider Cold War did begin in the Middle East in 1946, over the Soviet occupation of Iranian Azerbaijan. The Middle East proved to be a region which became an important ground for strategic competition and nuclear gamesmanship. Both the Suez crisis of 1956 and the October War of 1973 brought the United States and the Soviet Union close to nuclear confrontation, and of the 20 times the US issued a nuclear alert, six were related to events in the Middle East. Halliday notes that the Middle East received more arms than any other Third World region of Cold War concern. He qualifies these observations by arguing that Middle East never occupied the same level of importance as Europe or Asia, but

¹ Halliday, Fred. *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics, and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also: Halliday, Fred. “The Middle East, the Great Powers, and the Cold War.” In Yezid Sayigh and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The Cold War and the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

² Halliday 2005, p. 98.

he stressed that it played an important factor in both superpowers' global security calculations. A number of US presidential doctrines reflected this importance.³

Halliday also emphasizes the limits of the “fusion of regional and global politics.”⁴ He concludes that both superpowers avoided significant “direct” involvement in the Middle East. The US and the Soviet Union recognized that their military support only had “limited effect,” and this created a certain level of accepted tolerance for each other’s actions in the region. Both sides, despite their rhetorical antipathy towards one another, worked in many cases to minimize opportunities for “direct confrontation” in the Middle East.⁵

In addition, he observes that Middle Eastern states “displayed an ideological individuality and resilience that made them uneasy partners for both east and west.”⁶ Halliday writes that “in terms of influence on the course of events it is indubitable that the Cold War did provide the context and spur to many developments in the region: but the initiative all too often lay not in Moscow or Washington, but with the local states.”⁷ He notes that many events in the region happened not as a result of the Cold War context, but due to local context. For example, the Lebanese–Syrian relationship had no real Cold War dynamics. Finally, Halliday notes that the social movements and ideologies that emerged in the region developed due to local conditions and influences as much as or more so than the global influence of Cold War ideology.⁸

In his work, *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics*, Fawaz Gerges expands further on the dynamics of the interaction between great powers and small states. While his study focuses on 1955–1967, his analysis is relevant to understanding the great power–small state relations in the Middle East during the 1970s. Gerges makes three important observations.⁹

First, in contrast to the hierarchical assumptions made by International Relations literature which emphasizes a clear structure in world politics, Gerges finds that the relationship between a great power and a small state is both “complex and ambiguous,” eschewing these traditional assumptions. Importantly, he notes that great powers had limited ability to “manage and control” how small states acted. Gerges concludes that the agency of small

³ Halliday 2005, Ch. 4.

⁴ Halliday 2005, p. 125.

⁵ Halliday 2005, pp. 124–127.

⁶ Halliday 2005, p. 126.

⁷ Halliday 2005, p. 128

⁸ Halliday 2005, Ch. 4.

⁹ Gerges, Fawaz A. *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955–1967* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

states to pursue their own interests and how a great power's economic and military power often did not directly translate in a proportional manner.¹⁰

Gerges argues that the structure of the Cold War allowed small states to use this environment to their advantage. Small states could leverage tensions in the international system to their advantage by playing one great power off the other to pursue their interests and gain economic, military, and political benefits in their competition with one another. Great powers thus became unwitting benefactors and detractors in regional conflicts. Since the Cold War constrained the great powers' own global positions, small states had much freedom of action. In order to maintain their influence in the region, great powers, as patrons, often had to finance beyond what they intended to give their clients in order to protect their own positions in the region. Regional cooperation and cohesiveness gave small states a stronger position to bargain with the great powers in the Cold War as well.¹¹

Second, Gerges observes that relations between the great powers impacted how they approached the small states in the Middle East. As tensions between the great powers increased, so did the level of competition between these great powers to support small states in the Third World. This environment proved beneficial to small states and provided an opportunity, as Gerges notes, for great powers to test both their strategies and "weapons systems." As the tensions decreased between them, so did the level of support for small states, and the advantage they had in this environment decreased.¹²

Finally, Gerges notes that Israel served as an important variable in both regional relations and great power–small state relations. He concludes that support for the Palestinians became a tool regional states employed against one another in competition for power and influence in the region. This featured prominently in the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s between the conservative monarchies and Arab nationalist regimes in the region. The status and position of Israel both deepened tensions between small states in the region and increased these states' dependence on the Soviet Union as a counter-weight to Western support for Israel. Gerges notes that this, in turn, decreased small states' ability to resist "external influences and pressures." The bipolarity of the international system became a feature of the Middle East state system then and made these states more dependent on great powers at the expense of their own "freedom of action."¹³

¹⁰ Gerges 1994, pp. 2–3.

¹¹ Gerges 1994, pp. 2–3.

¹² Gerges 1994, p. 3.

¹³ Gerges 1994, p. 3–4.

Halliday's and Gerges' conclusions on the relations between great powers and small states in the Middle East in the Cold War align largely with the conclusions Odd Arne Westad makes in his seminal work, *The Global Cold War*. Westad observes, "The Cold War is still generally assumed to have been a contest between two superpowers over military power and strategic control, mostly centred on Europe. This book, on the contrary, claims that the most important aspects of the Cold War were neither military nor strategic, nor Europe-centred, but connected to political and social development in the Third World. I have argued that while the dual process of decolonization and Third World radicalization were not in themselves products of the Cold War they were influenced by it."¹⁴ Westad concludes, "The tragedy of Cold War history, both as far as the Third World and the superpowers were concerned, was that the two historical projects that were genuinely anti-colonial in their origins became part of a much older pattern of domination because of the intensity of their conflict, the stakes they believed were involved, and the almost apocalyptic fear of the consequences if the opponent won."¹⁵

The Arab–Israeli Conflict and the Syrian Peace Track

The Arab–Israeli conflict has a long historiography associated with it, but the Syrian peace track has received noticeably less attention. A few broader accounts of the Arab–Israeli conflict contribute to the wider understanding of the dynamics of the Syrian–Israeli disengagement agreements and the reasons why they never advanced. In *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, Avi Shlaim argues that throughout the 1970s, Israel reluctantly and intransigently made concessions for peace with Egypt and Syria, believing that its military position insulated it from having to make genuine peace concessions or reach a settlement with the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Building an "Iron Wall" was less costly for Israel in the short term than making genuine efforts at peace with its neighbours.¹⁶ Rashid Khalidi's works, *Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* and *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* argue that Israeli intransigence during the peace negotiations, as well as American

¹⁴ Westad, Odd Arne. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). p. 396.

¹⁵ Westad 2007, p. 397.

¹⁶ Shlaim, Avi. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

obstruction, have sustained Israel's control over most of the territory captured since the 1967 war.¹⁷

Benny Morris' *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* and Michael Oren's *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* provide an alternative narrative to Shlaim's and Khalidi's arguments and emphasizes the insecurity Israel has faced in its regional environment since its founding in 1947, as well as its reluctance to make peace at the expense of its own security.¹⁸ These works underscore the decades-old antipathy between Israel and its neighbours, which has complicated the ability to reach a comprehensive peace agreement.

The interaction between American domestic politics and the Arab–Israeli conflict that proved salient throughout the negotiations in the 1970s has been most extensively discussed in Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer's *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*.¹⁹ In that book, Walt and Mearsheimer examine the influential role the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and other pro-Israeli political groups have on both Congress and the White House. They conclude that these groups, which they term the "Israel Lobby," have used their domestic political weight to persuade successive American presidents to pursue pro-Israeli policies at the expense of America's national interests. Fawaz Gerges argues in his recent book, *Obama and the Middle East*, that few American presidents have been able to overcome the domestic political environment and expend political capital to assert presidential leadership in the peace process.²⁰ Ussama Makdisi's *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U.S.–Arab Relations: 1820–2001* illustrates how this position on the Arab–Israeli conflict accounts for the low Arab public opinion of the United States' policies in the Middle East.²¹

In the context of the shuttle diplomacy after the 1973, the historiography has tended to emphasize that Nixon and Kissinger prioritized the Egypt peace track above the Syrian one because of Sadat's willingness to make concessions with Israel to achieve a disengagement

¹⁷ Khalidi, Rashid. *Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013); Khalidi, Rashid. *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Morris, Benny. *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001); Oren, Michael B. *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Presidio Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Mearsheimer, John J. and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

²⁰ Gerges, Fawaz A. *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012A).

²¹ Makdisi, Ussama. *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U.S.–Arab Relations: 1820–2001* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010)

on the Sinai. Syria has been portrayed as a state less willing to make peace than Egypt. These accounts emphasize Kissinger's deeper level of personal trust in Sadat, and his own uncertainty and distrust of Hafiz al-Asad's intentions. They also portray the Syrian–Israeli disengagement agreements as a sideshow for Kissinger, with the purpose of preventing Damascus from spoiling the disengagement agreements between Egypt and Israel.²²

However, these accounts differ in their perceptions of American intentions. Seale and Yaqub conclude that from the start of these negotiations the US was pro-Israeli and Nixon and Kissinger, then Ford and Kissinger, sought to deceive the Arab states into reaching a settlement to both protect Israel and lift the 1973 oil embargo. In contrast, Stein, Isaacson, Lenczowski and Lesch all conclude that regional conditions and domestic politics in the US and Israel hampered Kissinger's efforts. Even with these points of divergence in their arguments, these writers commonly conclude that Kissinger never sought to reach a comprehensive settlement that would return to Israel's neighbours the land they lost after the 1967 war. Instead, they conclude that he was focused on getting these states involved in a process of demilitarization that would benefit Israel and ensure the security of America's interests in the region.²³

The current literature's arguments are limited by the fact that the Syrian–Israeli peace initiatives have received comparatively less examination than the accounts of Egypt's peace diplomacy, both in terms of analysis written and sources used. The Syrian–Israeli disengagement agreement of 1974 has been described in very broad terms in a number of these histories of the Arab–Israeli conflict. However, the second round of disengagement talks between Syria and Israel have received very little attention, often receiving only a paragraph or two about their failure in a larger section examining the Sinai II negotiations. These accounts have also tended to be focussed on the American side, relying exclusively on US cables, news articles, and Kissinger's extensive memoirs of his shuttles at the expense of

²² Hanhimaki, Jussi M. *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Isaacson, Walter. *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005); Dallek, Robert. *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); Schulze, Kirsten E. *The Arab–Israeli Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Lesch, David W. *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007A); Quandt, William B. *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab–Israeli Conflict Since 1967, 3rd edition* (Berkeley, CA: Brookings and University of California Press, 2005); Lenczowski, George. *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Stein, Kenneth W. *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab–Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Yaqub, Salim. "The Weight of Conquest: Henry Kissinger and the Arab–Israeli Conflict." In Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Seale, Patrick. *Asad: The Struggle for Syria* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

²³ Yaqub 2008; Seale 1990; Stein 1999; Isaacson 2005; Lenczowski 1990.

capturing fully the Syrian perspective. They often base their assessment of Hafiz al-Asad on how Kissinger and senior American officials perceived him. Patrick Seale's *Asad of Syria* provides the only detailed account from the Syrian perspective, and other writers on Syria's history have tended to borrow from and cite Seale's account in their works.²⁴

William Quandt, a former National Security Council official under Presidents Nixon and Carter, provides the fullest published account in his work, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab–Israeli Conflict Since 1967*. Using both archival documents and his personal recollections and interviews, Quandt offers a detailed account of the Egyptian talks, as well as an extensive account of the first disengagement between Syria and Israel. He devotes less attention to the subsequent, failed disengagement talks between Syria and Israel. Quandt identifies two reasons why American diplomacy failed: Israeli intransigence and a weakened domestic environment in the wake of Watergate. Quandt's account largely aligns with Kissinger's memoirs of his shuttle diplomacy and compliments Shlaim's account of the Israeli strategy in these negotiations.²⁵

The Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976

A number of writers and scholars have addressed Syria's decision to intervene in Lebanon in 1976 and the American response to the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976, but few of these authors have engaged the recently declassified US archival material or used extensive Syrian sources, beyond the use of news stories from regional press at the time. The literature is also deeply divided in its conclusions.

Addressing Syria's decision to intervene in 1976, in his article, "Pax-Syriana? The origins, causes and consequences of Syria's role in Lebanon," Raymond Hinnebusch argues that Hafiz al-Asad conceptualized his role in Lebanon not in the context of his country's identity but more in terms of realist strategic terms. Hinnebusch argues that in the context of the October War of 1973 and the failure to reach a settlement on the Golan, Lebanon became increasingly an important area for geopolitical competition between Syria and Israel as Asad sought to roll back "Greater Israel" and reclaim the Golan Heights. The unresolved conflict between the two states led to a proxy war in Lebanon. Asad saw the breakdown of the Lebanese state as an opportunity to prevent an Israeli intervention and an opportunity to make Lebanon subordinate to Syria. The Syrian president also considered it as an opportunity to cement his control over the Palestinian movement. Hinnebusch argues that

²⁴ Seale 1990.

²⁵ Quandt 2005; Lenczowski 1990; Shlaim 2000.

while Asad did not seek to annex Lebanon, he sought to control the state as a “sphere of influence.”²⁶

Hinnebusch disagrees with Fred Lawson’s argument in his article, “Syria’s Intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, 1976: A Domestic Conflict Explanation” that Syria’s decision to intervene was driven more by domestic considerations than geopolitical competition with Israel. Lawson concludes that tensions within the Syrian social strata during the mid-1970s and the impact the civil war was having on the Syrian economy were the primary factors driving President Asad to intervene in Lebanon. He notes that Syrian hegemony in Lebanon could both bring new economic resources to the Syrian state and also restore the Lebanese economy, which benefited Syria. These economic incentives could be used then to solidify the position of the Asad regime against its domestic opposition.²⁷

Patrick Seale, Naseer Aruri, and Bassel Salloukh attribute Syria’s decision to intervene in terms of the machinations of great powers, in particular the United States. Seale argues that Hafiz al-Asad was drawn into the civil war through US encouragement and actions on the ground to make the conditions favourable for a Syrian intervention. Seale notes that Asad’s intervention in Lebanon aligned with American goals in the small Mediterranean state, notably against the PLO. Seale downplays Syria’s own strategic motivations for intervening in Lebanon. Naseer Aruri, takes this idea a step further by arguing that from the autumn of October 1975 the US took an active role in courting President Asad to take such action. Bassel Salloukh supports this argument by making the assertion that Kissinger deceived President Asad by heightening his fears of an impending Israeli action in Lebanon, when Kissinger knew that such action was not planned.²⁸

Reuven Avi-Ran, Robert Rabil, and Fawwaz Traboulsi come to a conclusion opposite to that of Seale, Aruri, and Salloukh. They conclude that Asad independently decided to intervene in Lebanon, but that the US took a very proactive role in helping ensure that Syria’s intervention could occur. In particular, the US brokered an agreement between Syria and Israel to allow the intervention to occur. Rebutting these arguments, Naomi Joy Weinberger concludes that while Asad did act independently, the US did not actively advocate for a Syrian intervention in Lebanon, but instead decided to support Syria’s decision to intervene

²⁶ Hinnebusch, Raymond. “Pax-Syriana? The origins, causes and consequences of Syria’s role in Lebanon,” *Mediterranean Politics* 3:1 (1998), pp. 137–160.

²⁷ Lawson, Fred H. “Syria’s Intervention in the Lebanese Civil War, 1976: A Domestic Conflict Explanation,” *International Organization* 38:3 (Summer 1984), pp. 451–480.

²⁸ Seale 1990, pp. 276-289; Aruri, Naseer. “The Syrian Strategy and the Lebanese Conflict.” In Fouad Moughrabi and Naseer Aruri, eds., *Lebanon: Crisis and Challenge in the Arab World* (Detroit, MI: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1977), pp. 21-25; Salloukh, Bassel. “Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed,” *Middle East Report* 236 (Fall 2005), pp. 15–16.

in Lebanon as a result of its diplomacy not working. Weinberger concurs with the conclusions of Avi-Ran, Rabil, and Traboulsi that the US did play a role in brokering an agreement between Israel and Syria. Henry Kissinger's account in *Years of Renewal*, published after Weinberger's book, also supports this account.²⁹

However, with the exception of Seale's work none of these works employed American archival work or the oral histories of senior Syrian officials, largely due to the fact that such material was not available at the time most were published. The only work that has used some recently declassified American archival material is David M. Wight's recent article, "Kissinger's Levantine Dilemma: The Ford Administration and the Syrian Occupation of Lebanon," but it lacks original Syrian sources.

Wight largely supports Weinberger's account, but with the use of diplomatic cables. He argues that Kissinger's actions in relation to Lebanon were driven by a desire to maintain regional stability, prevent another Arab-Israeli conflict, limit Soviet influence, and to weaken PLO. He details the level of consultation between the US and Syria in the months leading to Syria's decision to intervene and the American reluctance for Syria to take military action. Using archival documents, Wight details the Israeli perspective on Syria's intervention in Lebanon and his account supports Avi Shlaim's analysis in *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. Using a selection of archival documents, Wight convincingly shows that a "red line" understanding was reached between Syria and Israel. He acknowledges, however, that that he could not definitively conclude whether or not the US gave a green light to Syria to intervene in June 1976 due to the lack of archival material available at the time of writing. Furthermore, Wight did not interview senior American policymakers from that period to try to fill this gap in archival sources, which could have been used to support his arguments.³⁰

The diverging views in the literature on both American and Syrian positions, along with the limited use of archival material, has resulted in these dimensions of the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976 remaining both understudied and inconclusive. This is particularly the case for the Syrian position. In the case of both the Syrian angle of the Arab-Israeli negotiations

²⁹ Avi-Ran, Reuven. *The Syrian Involvement in Lebanon since 1975* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 49-55; Rabil, Robert G. *Embattled Neighbors: Syria, Israel, & Lebanon* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp. 50-53; Weinberger, Naomi Joy. *Syrian Intervention in Lebanon: The 1975–1976 Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Kissinger, Henry. *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), pp. 1020-1056.

³⁰ Wight, David M. "Kissinger's Levantine Dilemma: The Ford Administration and the Syrian Occupation of Lebanon," *Diplomatic History* 37:1 (2013), pp. 144–177; Shlaim 2000, pp. 340–351.

from 1973-1975 and the American and Syrian roles in the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976, the thesis seeks to address these noticeable gaps in the literature.

Sources and Methodology

The primary source material used in this thesis has enriched the understanding of this period of US–Syrian relations. The thesis engages a diversity of sources in examining both sides of US–Syrian relations. In analysing the US side, this study engages newly opened archival material from the National Archives and the Ford Presidential Library, written memoirs by former senior US officials, and the State Department’s recently released collection of Kissinger’s phone conversation transcripts. It also consults the existing secondary literature and Kissinger’s several voluminous memoirs. Interviews with relevant US officials have also been conducted.

In capturing the Syrian side, a mixture of sources has been consulted. Interviews with former and current Syrian officials, and also with officials in the region who had knowledge of Syria’s perspective, have enabled one to gain valuable insight on Syria’s foreign policy. This thesis employs also written sources — speeches, radio broadcasts, and newspapers — but archival material presently is not available. The on-going civil war in Syria and the natural passage of time has also limited the availability of a few senior Syrian officials from that time period to interview.

Crucially, this study examines decision-making from the elite level. While some studies place a value in tracing a decision or explaining the decision-making process and its impact on the decision itself, this thesis avoids this approach. Instead, it addresses both domestic and international influences that shape how an elite decision-maker comes to a decision. In the case of the United States and Syria, the presidency, in particular under Richard Nixon and under Hafiz al-Asad, centred foreign policymaking at the executive level. In the United States, domestic politics also acted as an important constraint on American decision-making. However, this thesis avoids looking at how non-executive decision-makers addressed and responded to their countries’ foreign policy changes.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1: Framework for Understanding US–Syrian relations: Identity and Interests

Identity and interests both act as important conceptual lenses in understanding the behaviour of these states and their relations with one another. This chapter provides a survey of the

theoretical literature that addresses the role of identity and interests in International Relations. It also examines alliance formation literature to help conceptualize the US–Syrian relationship.

Chapter 2: The Consolidation of Syrian Power in the Arab World: An Enduring Security Dilemma

This chapter traces the evolution of Syria's strategic position in the International Relations of the Middle East and the re-orientation of the state's foreign policy under Hafiz al-Asad from an irredentist, revisionist foreign policy to one that balanced the state's identity with its strategic interests. It also addresses Syria's enduring security dilemma and how this unfavourable security environment shaped how Syrian leaders, including Hafiz al-Asad, have responded to Syria's regional environment.

Chapter 3: Syria as a Challenge to American Foreign Policy: A Missing Security Architecture

This chapter examines the evolution of the US's role in the Levant after the end of the Second World War and the growing role of the Arab–Israeli conflict in America's policies to the region. It notes how successive US presidents sought to create a security architecture that maintained Israel's security at the expense of its neighbours and concurrently sought to preclude the Soviet Union from the region. It also addresses how Syria emerged as a challenge to the US's preferred security architecture for the region, and how the US sought to contain Syria from the late 1940s to the late 1960s.

Chapter 4: Black September, 1970: Syria and the US encounter a Crisis in Jordan

This chapter examines the United States' and Syria's responses to the crisis in Jordan in 1970 and how each state responded to one another's involvement. From the American perspective, the chapter first examines how Nixon and Kissinger sought to re-orientate American foreign policy globally when Nixon took office in 1969. It then looks at how Kissinger and Nixon conceptualized America's interests and identity in their foreign policy. The chapter then applies Nixon and Kissinger's new approach to America's foreign relations to understand the US's first encounter with Syria after 1967. From the Syrian perspective, it looks at how Syria's competing elite, including Hafiz al-Asad, responded to the crisis in Jordan in the wake of June 1967. Instead of producing a period of improved relations between the two states, it marked a continuity of their former relations.

Chapter 5: The 1975 Golan Negotiations: US–Syrian Relations and the Arab–Israeli conflict

This chapter examines the impact of the October War of 1973 and the emergence of a brief period of security cooperation between the US and Syria. Negotiations between the United States and Syria occurred from 1973 to 1975 on securing a full disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights. Importantly, this chapter illustrates President Asad’s willingness to engage the United States and to come to an agreement with Israel, even at the expense of his state’s long-held ideational position on the neighbouring state. This period also marked the United States’ transition from its policy of containing Syria to engaging Syria as part of the US’s larger strategy of securing a disengagement agreement first between Egypt and Israel, and then, if possible, Israel’s other neighbours. However, the chapter also examines how, despite reaching an initial agreement, Ford and Kissinger were unwilling to expend the political capital needed to broker a second disengagement between Syria and Israel. Instead, prioritizing a second disengagement agreement with Egypt, Ford and Kissinger deceptively kept Asad engaged in the process. Finally, this chapter examines the impact that Sinai II had on both states’ relations with one another.

Chapter 6: The US Acquiesces to Syria’s Intervention in Lebanon: US–Syrian Relations and Lebanon’s Civil War of 1975–1976

In the lead up to and then after the signing of Sinai II, the United States and Syria were confronting a crisis in Lebanon. This chapter first examines Syria’s response to the deepening civil war in Lebanon, and Asad’s reluctant decision to intervene militarily in June 1976. Syria’s relations with Lebanese political groups are examined as well, as is the role Israel played in Syria’s calculations. The chapter then looks at the American response to the civil war. Importantly, it examines why Ford and Kissinger switched from publically opposing Syrian intervention to supporting the intervention. Finally, the chapter looks at the extent of US–Syrian security cooperation in Lebanon. The United States played an important role in brokering a “red lines” agreement between Syria and Israel, which established how far Israel was willing to tolerate an intervention in Lebanon. Even though the US did not give a “green light” to intervention, the Lebanese Civil War created an opportunity for renewed security cooperation between the two states.

Impact of this Study

This study of this critical period in US–Syrian relations is important in several regards. First, it contributes to the wider literature on the International Relations of the Middle East by

introducing identity and interests as conceptual lenses that can be used simultaneously to understand and interpret state behaviour and inter-state alliances in the Middle East. Breaking with existing traditions in International Relations of the Middle East literature, this study challenges future readers and students of the International Relations of the Middle East to take a more comprehensive view of Arab state behaviour.

Second, this thesis offers a short footnote on great power and small state relations by illustrating the dynamics of the US–Syrian relationship during a critical period of the Cold War. The thesis examines how the Cold War shaped events during this period and, equally, had very little impact on events in the case of the Lebanese Civil War. The thesis offers a perspective on how a small state — Syria — managed to manipulate the bipolarity of the international system to its benefit. It also illustrates how the United States, a great power shaped by the larger Cold War context, became involved in the minutiae of local conflicts.

Third, this study illustrates the importance of International History in the study of International Relations. By using both historical methods and International Relations theory, it illustrates how archival material and primary source material can strengthen the analysis provided by International Relations theory, and shows how International Relations theory can be used to conceptualize, order, and guide historical research. This study breaks from International Relations theory traditions that put a larger emphasis on the indicative and predicative value of theory.

Fourth, this thesis contributes to the limited body of literature on Syria’s political history during the presidency of Hafiz al-Asad. Due to the constraints imposed by the political system in Syria, researchers have been limited in their access to both archival material and political figures from that time period. This has resulted in Syrian political history becoming under-studied in the academic literature. Arguably, this thesis is one of few studies, other than Patrick Seale’s account, that has ever incorporated the oral history of senior Syrian officials from this period. If Syria ever does enter a democratic transition, Syrian students can hopefully engage this work in understanding an important period in their country’s foreign relations.

Fifth, this thesis also contributes to the limited body of literature on Lebanon’s civil war of 1975–1976. While there have been well-documented accounts in the secondary literature of the domestic factors in the breakdown of the Lebanese state and the politics of the confessional groups and militias in Lebanon, the accounts of Syria and American involvement this civil war has led to more questions than answers, with a number of

accounts using very little primary source material — and, at times, extensive speculation — to substantiate their analysis. This has resulted in this international dynamics of the civil war being occasionally misunderstood.

Sixth, as a study of US–Syrian relations, this thesis contributes to the analysis of America’s foreign relations in the 1970s and its relations with the Arab world during this important decade. As one of the first accounts to use both primary source material and oral history interviews to examine the Syrian–Israeli disengagement talks and American role in the Lebanese civil war of 1975–1976, this thesis enriches the diplomatic history literature of this period. It also illustrates the main domestic and international roadblocks to the US achieving a peace settlement between Israel and its neighbours, in this case, Syria. This thesis underscores the important role domestic politics played in constraining the US’s ability to broker a second disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel.

Finally, as a study of US–Syrian relations, this study could perhaps serve as a future reference to a new generation of American and Syrian politicians, diplomats, academics, and public policy scholars who deal with this relationship after Syria’s current civil war. This study of US–Syrian from 1973–1977 offers a more nuanced understanding of the areas where cooperation both succeeded and failed in achieving their respective interests.

CHAPTER 1

FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING US– SYRIAN RELATIONS

IDENTITY AND INTERESTS

Relations between states can be conceptualized, studied, and approached from different angles. Empirically, a wide number of historical studies have offered compelling accounts of relations between states. Theoretically, a diverse body of literature has prescribed theoretical approaches for inter-state behaviour.

These methods also present limitations. Preferencing one theoretical approach over another leads to studies ignoring core features of state relations. No one theory can provide a complete explanation of inter-state politics. Empirical studies of inter-state relations present problems as well. They fail to capture the larger picture of inter-state relations, and do not discern whether the events or circumstances represent a wider feature in interstate relations or are purely exceptional to the period covered in the studies.¹

To address these limitations, this thesis uses both identity and interests as conceptual lenses to understand US–Syrian relations between 1973 and 1977. Identity a significant feature of constructivism, and interests, a core concept of realism, offer differing perspectives on inter-state behaviour and provide critical insights into why states pursue particular foreign policy choices and form alliances. Constructivist explanations focus on identity as the key determinant of states' foreign policy choices and their alliance partner preferences. In contrast, realist explanations emphasize that interests drive interstate relations, and states' identity matters very little in international politics.² This study considers ideology a product of a state's identity. Ideology constitutes a state's ideational beliefs and these beliefs reflect a state's identity. A state's elites may promote a specifically defined ideology in their actions and discourse. Instead of trying to delineate the two ideational terms separately, this

¹ Halliday, Fred. *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics, and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

² Hinnebusch, Raymond. *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Halliday 2007.

study uses the broader conceptual term identity to more fully capture the non-material aspects of a state's behaviour.³

In the case of US–Syrian relations, identity accounts for the US position on the Arab–Israeli conflict, as well as Syria's conceptions of its relations with its neighbours and its support of Palestinian rights. The United States and Syria also pursue realist goals. Syria has gone directly against its identity on numerous occasions, most notably in its curtailment of the PLO in Lebanon in 1976, and the US has partnered with Syria in Lebanon even though Syria does not recognize Israel.⁴

Thus, one theoretical lens does not sufficiently account for their relations. Instead, this study makes a critical observation that in some cases, identity plays a more pronounced role in explaining their interactions than interests. Equally so, in other cases, interests play a more salient role in accounting for some of the decisions taken by the US and Syria. Policymakers have to weigh both a state's identity and its strategic interests in making foreign policy decisions and, as a result, in many cases one cannot separate these two aspects of state behaviour. Unlike other studies, this thesis looks at the relationship from both conceptual angles. Most writers stress one over the other, but such an approach ignores the reality of the two countries' bilateral relations and aspects of a state's behaviour unaccounted for by one conceptual lens. This approach thus offers a stronger and more nuanced approach to examining relations between the two states.

As a framework for analysis, theory neither predicts nor explains, but acts as focal point of inquiry in ordering and interpreting empirical data from the period.⁵ Stanley Hoffman writes that theory provides a set of questions that can be used to guide and focus research. Theory aids in explanation, but it does not offer an explanation on its own.⁶ The historical record can offer explanations for this critical period of their interaction, but without the engagement of theory, key features of their relations are overlooked.

³ Telhami, Shibley and Michael Barnett. *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Cassels, Alan. *Ideology and International Relations in the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1996); Quinn, Adam. *US Foreign Policy in Context: National ideology from the Founders to the Bush Doctrine* (London: Routledge, 2010); Halliday, Fred and Hamza Alavi. *State and Ideology in the Middle East & Pakistan* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

⁴ Hinnebusch, Raymond. "The Foreign Policy of Syria." In Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002); Weinberger, Naomi Joy. *Syrian Intervention in Lebanon: The 1975–1976 Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁵ Aron, Raymond. *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, trans. R. Howard and A. Baker Fox (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), p. 49.

⁶ Hoffman, Stanley. *Contemporary Theory in International Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), pp. 7–8.

This conceptual framework helps understand the larger question of this study: *What accounts for security cooperation between the United States and Syria from 1973-1977?*

Through engaging both theory and the historical record, this study provides a deeper and clearer account of US–Syrian relations than a purely empirically guided historical study. This study breaks with approaches that employ solely an empirical or theoretical approach, and uses these conceptual lenses to examine a relationship that has not been scrutinized before in this light.

This conceptual chapter is more of a footnote to organize data rather than to make a contribution to the theoretical debate. It introduces the core theoretical concepts of this study, and places them in their respective literature. The chapter then examines the US and Syria’s foreign policies in the context of these features of international politics. Finally, it explores how US–Syrian relations can be better understood through the engagement of identity and interests.

1.1. Realpolitik and the Emergence of Alliances

Realism has often been characterized as the default theory in international politics. As the original theory, it acts as the null hypothesis in many positivist studies in international relations. Realism fundamentally argues that states are driven by material interests, and due to the state of anarchy in the international system, states must compete with each other to survive.⁷

Interests represent a state’s “self-regarding desire” for power, security, and wealth. Interests are considered material, because in contrast to ideas, they are immutable and objective. Through the accumulation of power, a state increases its security and wealth. Power fundamentally rests in the military capabilities of a state, but it can be supported by other sources of strength such as economic capabilities. Survival is the *raison d’état*, and all elites know and recognize this.⁸

⁷ Jackson, Robert and Georg Sorensen. *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 60–94.

⁸ Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th edition revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 4–17.

Elites are driven by the desire to increase the power of the state and to ensure its survival. Human nature drives elites to pursue power, and it becomes a moral philosophy that they must justify to their constituents.⁹ Unlike in states where a monopoly of violence prevents a state from experiencing the Hobbesian “state of nature”, the international system lacks a central monopoly of violence, and as a result, anarchy is a permanent feature of the international system.¹⁰ Anarchy ensures that the state system is inherently insecure and competitive, and that war and conflict occurs on a regular basis. Elites must always be prepared to defend their states’ survival, and to gain a better position against another state—even if that means going to war. Realism thus takes a very pessimistic view of human nature, and concludes that progress will never occur in international politics.¹¹

Cooperation amongst states only reflects a means to an end, and can only be a temporary arrangement. In the short term, alliances reflect the preference of states to pursue a balance of power against states with greater power, ensuring one state does not acquire too much power. States naturally balance against other states to maintain an equilibrium of power in the international system, and to ensure their survival and security. In the long term, states cannot trust other states to ensure their own survival and, as a result, they constantly face a security dilemma. States must always be prepared to form new alliances as the international environment changes. Regardless of a state’s identity or ideology, all states’ elites play by the rules of interest-based politics (also known as power politics or “*realpolitik*”) to survive.¹²

Realism has its roots in the centuries of power politics literature, most notably Thucydides’ enduring account of the Peloponnesian War, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and Niccolo Machiavelli’s counsel to the Medici family, *Il Principe*.¹³ As the centre of international relations up until the 20th century, Europe acted as the core area to observe and study inter-state relations. From the Treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648 to the 1920 Treaty of Versailles, patterns of European inter-state behaviour driven by statesmen’s statecraft could accurately be accounted for by realism.¹⁴ The horrific atrocities and carnage of World

⁹ Morgenthau 1993, pp. 27–111.

¹⁰ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Classics: 1985).

¹¹ Morgenthau 1993, pp. 275–384.

¹² Morgenthau 1993, pp. 181–215.

¹³ For an overview of power politics literature, consult: Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Classics, 1972); Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Classics, 1999); Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Classics: 1985).

¹⁴ Kissinger, Henry A. *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

War II stamped out a brief moment of European politics where realism had been challenged by liberalism.¹⁵

Reflecting on European politics, Hans Morgenthau (in his seminal work *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*) and E. H. Carr (*The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*) first articulated the core concepts of realism.¹⁶ These works became the foundational texts of classical realism.¹⁷

Up until the late 1970s, realism had largely been viewed through this lens. In 1979, Kenneth Waltz's ground-breaking work, *Theory of International Politics*, redefined the study of realism in International Relations. Breaking with the tradition of classical realism, Waltz argues that systemic features of the international system—and not the judgment of the states' elites—determine why states pursue their interests. Relative power in the international system thus guides the behaviour of states. He further argues that states that are naturally hesitant to cooperate with one another balance against one another through alliances in the pursuit of their national interest. These alliances are determined by states' relative power, and prevent one state from endangering the survival of other states. Waltz concluded that that the system, instead of the state, drove international politics.¹⁸

Waltz's work removed the individuality of states and imposed on the states a unitary quality. As Valerie Hudson characterized it, the state became a “black box.”¹⁹ The personalities of leaders and their perceptions became irrelevant to the positivist determinism of Waltz's theory.²⁰ Waltz assumes that states' elites automatically pursue their states' national interest. Interstate conflict, which is inevitable, is driven by the system instead of the states' elites. Relative power instead of statecraft became the focus of realist studies. Human nature was taken out of the equation.²¹

To be equitable to Waltz, in *Theory of International Politics*, he never presumes that his neorealist theory should be used to understand particular states' behaviour; instead, he sought to explain general patterns of state behaviour in an anarchical system. Through this

¹⁵ Carr, E.H. *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, introduction by Michael Cox (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

¹⁶ Carr 2001; Morgenthau 1993, pp. 4–17. To note, Morgenthau also reflects on the United States' historical experience as a realist actor.

¹⁷ With the introduction of Kenneth Waltz's neorealism, the early study of realism has been referred to as classical realism in the literature.

¹⁸ Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley, 1979).

¹⁹ Hudson, Valerie M. *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

²⁰ Hudson 2006.

²¹ Waltz 1979.

statement, Waltz concedes the limits of a system-based theory of international politics. A system-based theory though helps one better evaluate long-term patterns of inter-state behaviour.²²

In contrast to John J. Mearsheimer, Waltz believes that states are inherently defensive and do not seek to dominate the international system. While states may seek power in limits, they are hesitant to amass more power than necessary.²³ A proper balance of power ensures the stability of the international system. Waltz writes that superpowers should manage the international system.²⁴ In his noted work, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer argues that states are aggrandizers of power, and that they seek to become hegemons. Mearsheimer disagrees with Waltz's belief that states are hesitant to amass excessive amounts of power.²⁵

Stephen Walt further refined Waltz's neorealism. In his notable work, *Origins of Alliances*, Walt questions whether relative power distributions in the international system accurately account for why states form alliances. Viewing alliances through power distribution assumes that states form alliances to balance against more powerful states. Through examination of alliances formed between Middle East states from 1955 to 1979, Walt convincingly found that states form alliances to balance against threats, instead of in response to the relative power of other states. States' alliances shift as the threat environment changes. Walt found that weak states tended to band together with larger states to ensure their survival.²⁶

States evaluate other states' threats based on four general criteria: aggregate strength, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions. Aggregate strength constitutes the states' size, population, and economic capabilities. Geographical proximity relates to how close the threatening state is to the state in question. Offensive capabilities represent the ability of one state to endanger another state, and offensive intentions describe whether a state has the intention to threaten another state. These criteria show that threats vary for each particular state.²⁷ Significantly, Walt contributes a deeper and more refined understanding of states' alliance formation behaviour.

Walt also makes an important judgment on identity in Arab politics in the *Origins of Alliances*. He argues that while Arab nationalism had a unifying effect on the Arab states

²² Waltz 1979, pp. 121–122.

²³ Waltz 1979, pp. 102–129.

²⁴ Waltz 1979, pp. 194–210.

²⁵ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001).

²⁶ Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 1987).

²⁷ Walt 1987, pp. 17–50.

around common objectives at times, Arab states primarily pursued their *raison d'état* when forming alliances. He questions literature that assumes that a common Arab identity acted as a driving force for alliance formation in the region. He concedes, however, that at rare times, the common Arab identity overrode any realist interest of a state. Walt interchanges identity and ideology in his study. He indicates that even at times when ideology drove alliances, it acted as a form of balancing against states with ideologies hostile to these states.²⁸

Realist literature provides different conceptualizations of interest-based international politics. From classical realism to neorealism and its subsequent modifications, different scholars have engaged realism to further understand and explain interest-based politics.²⁹ In his work, *Causes of War: Power and Roots of Conflict*, Stephen Van Evera builds on Walt's work by arguing that states with significant offensive opportunities or substantial defensive vulnerabilities will often go to war against other states.³⁰

Robert Jervis introduces the role perception plays in International Relations. In his landmark work, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Jervis argues that a state's perception of the international system affects how a state will act in that system, and that as a result, a state may not always conform to how a state is supposed to act in the system, as neorealists argue. Misperception can lead to the state finding itself in a weakened or disadvantageous position. Robert Jervis' work raises an important qualifier to systemic theories that assume a state will always pursue set rational patterns of behaviour, and introduces cognitive psychology into the study of International Relations.³¹

This study conceptualizes interests in the context of neorealism, but with some modifications. While the system places inherent constraints on states, and the power distribution within the system significantly impacts the choices elites can make about their states' foreign policy choices, elites still feature at the centre of foreign policy decision-making and can rarely choose to ignore the pursuit of their states' interests. While the

²⁸ Walt 1987, pp. 181–218.

²⁹ Gilpin, Robert G. "The richness of the tradition of political realism," *International Organization* 38 (1984), pp. 287–304; Keohane Robert O., ed. *Neorealism and Its Critics* (Ithaca, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986); Walt, Stephen M. "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, (110, Spring 1998), pp. 29–45. For a review and information on neoclassical realism (a mixture of classical realism and neorealism), consult: Lobell, Steven E., Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds. *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2009).

³⁰ Van Evera, Stephen. *Causes of War: Power and Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

³¹ Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press: 1976).

system proves consequential, it is not deterministic.³² In addition, this study agrees with Stephen Walt that a “balance of threats” is more conducive to explaining inter-state behaviour than a “balance of power”. Foreign policy elites’ evaluate their alliance partners through Walt’s indicators of a state’s threat environment.³³

Overall, realism makes a significant contribution to understanding state behaviour and alliance formation. Its focus on interests as the driving force for interstate politics and acts as a very insightful lens in examining interstate relations. Alliance formation in particular can be understood through realism.

1.2. Are States More Complex? Identity and International Politics

Responding to the challenge of Waltz’s neorealism, scholars have asked whether states are more complex. Can material interests and power solely account for a state’s behaviour and its alliances? Does identity have a role in the shaping of states’ foreign policies? Is the international system static? These scholars found realist explanations of international politics as reductionist: States cannot be differentiated purely on the basis of relative power, and these explanations ignore the full spectrum of inter-state behaviour. A state’s identity has a critical role in shaping the foreign policy choices a state pursues. States often make foreign policy decisions that often contradict the pursuit of purely material interests.³⁴

In a vibrant critique of Waltz, Alexander Wendt conceptualizes constructivism as a theory of international politics in his seminal work, *Social Theory of International Politics*. Applying social theory, Wendt argues that the international system is socially constructed through states’ interactions. While anarchy exists in the international system, states’ interactions do not always reflect this condition of anarchy. Instead, state interactions reflect ideas of material interests. For Wendt, ideas are inter-subjective, and are not individual and pre-determined. Through interaction, states form an international system reflective of shared

³² Waltz 1979; Morgenthau 1993.

³³ Walt 1987.

³⁴ Onuf, Nicholas. *World of Our Own Making* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989); Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Adler, Immanuel. “The Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 3:3 (September 1998), pp. 291–318; Katzenstein, Peter, ed. *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1996); Hall, Rodney Bruce. “Moral Authority as a Power Resource,” *International Organization* 51:4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 591–622; Bukovandky, Mlada. “American Identity and Neutral Rights from Independence to the War of 1812,” *International Organization* 51:2 (Spring 1997), pp. 209–244; Keck, Margaret and Kathryn Sikkink. *Activists beyond Borders* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

common ideas. States within the system thus reflect the ideas of the system, but states still have the power to reconstitute the nature of the international order.³⁵

Waltz's "self-help" model of inter-state politics reflects only one particular type of inter-state relations.³⁶ As Alexander Wendt explains, "The claim is not that ideas are more important than power and interest, or that they are autonomous from power and interest. The claim is rather that power and interest have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up. Power and interests explanations presuppose ideas, and to that extent are not rivals to ideational explanations at all."³⁷

States acquire their identities through participating in these social interactions in the international system. Identity reflects the common values of the system. States' interests are rooted in their identity, and states pursue "interests" that reflect how states perceive their identity. As a result, interests lose their independent analytical value, because interests no longer have set, determined values, and are dependent on a state's identity.³⁸

Wendt's theory is inherently systemic. Wendt argues that inter-state behaviour can be understood through examining the system constructed by states. States' identities reflect the shared ideas of the state system. However, states have the ability to redefine the collective meaning of the system and change the pattern of interactions of the system. But in the short term, state identity remains quite definable and consistent, Wendt argues. State identity thus can be characterized as a product of a two-way interaction between the state and its outside environment and the outside environment and the state.³⁹

Since Wendt's original conceptualization, different scholars have engaged constructivism further and have applied it to a wide range of empirical research. Constructivist scholars have produced a diverse number of interpretations of this theory, and have questioned Wendt's systemic focus. Even though the diversity of this field's research agenda raises more questions than it answers, the guiding concepts of this field can be generally represented as follows: states' social interactions constitute the international system, states

³⁵ Wendt 1999, pp. 92–138.

³⁶ Wendt 1999, p. 18.

³⁷ Wendt 1999, pp. 135–136.

³⁸ Wendt 1999, pp. 93–245.

³⁹ Wendt 1999, pp. 313–369.

can change the nature of the international system, and ideas instead of material interests drive inter-state behaviour.⁴⁰

The conception of identity is of particular concern to this study, and features as a core part of constructivist research. Identity serves as a useful conceptual lens for understanding a state's foreign policy. Constructivist scholars agree that identity emerges from the "social environment of domestic and international politics." Differences exist in the literature over the definition of identity and the weight of the international or the domestic in shaping and defining a state's identity.⁴¹

No singular definition of identity has been accepted in the literature. This reality has opened the door for some to charge that identity is not a useful term to analytically study a state's foreign policy. Because identity encompasses different meanings for different scholars, identity often encompasses everything, but does not exclude anything.⁴² In spite of this criticism, Michael Barnett and Shibley Telhami offer a clear conceptualization of identity: "Identities, in short, are not only personal or psychological, but are also social, profoundly influenced by the actor's interaction with and relationship to others."⁴³

The origins of identities have been contested in the literature, with some scholars placing a greater emphasis on the international while others focus on the domestic. In reality, identity is conceived very differently in these situations. In the case of international interpretations, identity develops as a result of interaction with the system, and often describes how states interact with other states in the system. In the case of domestic interpretations, the development of a state's identity is through the interaction of competing identities within a state's culture. The system can influence the identity, but the identity comes from the state, and is not necessarily inter-subjective. This identity offers insight into how a state perceives its environment and how it may act, but not necessarily how the state itself acts.⁴⁴

Alexander Wendt focuses more on the system and how it impacts and shapes a state's identity, rather than the domestic sources of a state's identity. He argues that a state enters into interactions with other states with a conception of itself, but its identity only forms once it interacts with other states. An identity needs to be legitimated by other states, because an identity originates from inter-subjective ideas. Identity can be understood in two broad

⁴⁰ Finnemore, Martha and Kathryn Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics," *American Review of Political Science* 4 (2001), pp. 391–416.

⁴¹ Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, pp. 398–400.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Telhami and Barnett 2002, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Finnemore and Sikkink, pp. 398–400.

categories: type and role. Type identity describes the common features one state shares with another state. The international system is important in the sustainability of this identity, because this identity rests in whether it is perceived as legitimate. Role identity characterizes the relative relations the state has with other states.⁴⁵

Peter Katzenstein argues that identity emerges from the domestic sphere of the state, but interacts with the international system in its formulization. A state's identity remains unfixed, and during different periods one identity features more prominently than others. More than one identity can exist within the confines of a state. It can be introduced from the top down or emerge from the ground up, and often reflects the culture of the state or the wider system that the state interacts in.⁴⁶

Michael Barnett and Shibley Telhami conclude that a state's elites acts as the primary arbiter of a state's identity. Entering office, elites can either support the current state identity or suppress it and refashion the state's identity to fits their own conception. Depending on the state, elites' freedom of option in making such decisions varies. Where a state's identity is deeply entrenched within a state, elites face very little options in pursuing another identity if they seek to change it.⁴⁷

The international system plays a role in influencing and shaping a state's identity. As a result of the international system, one identity may prove more viable than other identities. Elites are confronted with the reality that their state interacts with the international system, and a state's identity may not always prove to be pursuable in the climate of the international system. The international system can also introduce an identity into the state's domestic culture that elites must contend with.⁴⁸

Constructivists argue that a state's foreign policy can be understood through examining its identity. This link though is more complex, because the relationship between the elites and the state's identity varies in circumstance. On the one hand, an identity may conceptualize the worldview and interests of an elite, and as a result, an elite can pursue a state's foreign policy that is in line with their own interests. In situations where a state's identity endangers the survival of the elites or constrains their ability to act, elites depending on their position within the state can conform to that identity, adapt the identity to fit its own interests and worldview, or introduce a new identity. At different times and situations, political elites may

⁴⁵ Wendt 1999.

⁴⁶ Katzenstein 1996.

⁴⁷ Telhami and Barnett 2002, pp. 1–18.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

find themselves in sync or opposition to their state's identity. Elites responses vary in circumstances and must always take in account the domestic and international environment of the state.⁴⁹

No singular theory or explanation exists in the literature that solely accounts for the relationship between identity, elites, and foreign policy. In their work, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Middle East scholars Michael Barnett and Shibley Telhami pose more questions about this relationship than answers. They make two general observations. First, no singular explanation for state or national identity formation exists: "At best we are likely to find that certain explanations dominate in a particular region or for a particular period."⁵⁰ Second, no leading single variable operates at any one situation: "Although one variable is likely to account for a greater part of the story, additional factors usually influence the outcome."⁵¹

The Middle East encapsulates many identities that interact and often compete with one another for hegemony within a state and in the region.⁵² In *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, Michael Barnett concludes that within the region, state and national identity often do not correspond. The Arab identity existed before the state system, and as a result, the statist identity often lacked the legitimacy of the wider Arab identity in the early decades of the state system. The sovereignty of the state often was challenged. Barnett's work underscores the complexity of the Middle East and illustrates the limitations of traditional International Relations approaches when studying the region. His work acknowledges the need to consider several conceptual lenses for accounting for elite and state relations in the Middle East.⁵³

In his work, Barnett observes the evolution of the post-war Arab state system. He argues that the 1950s and 1960s marked the height of the Arab nationalist identity in the region. Nasser used the "Voice of the Arabs" radio program to promulgate his message to the Arab world, creating a sense of a transnational Arab community in the Middle East. Regional leaders had to respond to this identity in their foreign policy decisions, and often had to balance statist

⁴⁹ Telhami and Barnett 2002, pp. 1–18.

⁵⁰ Telhami and Barnett 2002, p. 13.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Telhami, Shibley and Michael Barnett. *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁵³ Ibid.

interests with the interests of the wider Arab community in formulating their foreign policies.⁵⁴

Different states in the region responded to this identity differently. Nationalist state leaders in the region perceived the value of this identity in consolidating their position at home and strengthening their states' position within the region. In contrast, conservative monarchies felt the most imperilled during this period. Other states were caught in the middle, most notably Jordan and Lebanon. Arab nationalism both empowered and disempowered states' elites in pursuit of their states' foreign policies.⁵⁵

Barnett argues that these states could not escape "the Arab game", because this identity existed throughout the region. In all of these states, leaders had to ask how their foreign policy actions would be perceived in contrast to this Arab nationalist identity? Were their actions legitimate? Arab leaders could not ignore the reality that they were both state leaders and leaders in a wider Arab community. Arab nationalism impacted and shaped these states' interests and the "means" that these states had to pursue these interests. Leaders had to frame their policies in the "symbols" of Arab nationalism. Even the most conservative states could not escape this dialogue with Arab nationalism. Arab nationalism often moved these states to consensus and solidarity. Survival of the state rested on engaging this identity.⁵⁶

Barnett though observes that this was a two-way game. Arab nationalism did not have a deterministic effect on the behaviour of states. Arab states often manipulated Arab nationalism to serve their own interests. This identity also created competition and tension within the region. Competition for leadership and definition of this identity and resentment of states in the region who asserted hegemony through this identity caused the identity to fragment and become de-constructed. Each state began to offer their own interpretation of Arab nationalism and how it best fit the interests of each particular state. As a result, statist identities emerged in the region in the 1970s as a result of how this "game of Arab politics" was played.⁵⁷

While no agreement exists in the literature on the definition or origin of an identity, constructivism introduces the non-material aspects of a state's behaviour into the study of international politics. Constructivist scholars acknowledge that identity plays an important

⁵⁴ Telhami and Barnett 1998.

⁵⁵ Telhami, Shibley and Michael Barnett. *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). See also: Dawisha, Adeed. *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵⁶ Telhami and Barnett 1998, pp. 1–53.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

role in constituting a state's foreign behaviour, and this feature of international politics is of particular concern to this study. Engaging both the domestic and international sources of identity can help understand the foreign policies of states.⁵⁸

1.3. The United States: *Realpolitik*?

With the emergence of the United States as a superpower at the end of the Second World War, post-war American policymakers largely adopted a realist worldview in charting the future of America's role in the world. Unlike small states or regional powers, the US's interests span the globe, and its economic and military capabilities have ensured that it can manage this role.⁵⁹

The Cold War was the predominant context of American foreign policy until the 1990s. With its sizeable conventional and nuclear forces, the Soviet Union represented the largest global threat to the US's national security. George Kennan, in his anonymously penned article in the July 1947 edition of *Foreign Affairs* entitled "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", outlined a realist approach towards responding to the emerging threat of the Soviet Union in shaping the new international order.⁶⁰ He argued that the US had to contain the spread of Soviet communism to ensure the security of the US's leading position in the international system. Containment became the backbone of American Cold War policy.⁶¹

Shaped by the bipolar condition of the international system, the United States competed with the Soviet Union for power and influence throughout the world. American policymakers considered this competition a zero-sum game where every region of the world was an area that could be lost. American interests, rooted in security, material, and power considerations, were constantly challenged by the Soviet Union. War was always on the mind of policymakers and a possibility existed that a war could break out between the United States and the Soviet Union at any moment. In this anarchic system, survival often hung in the balance.⁶²

⁵⁸ Telhami and Barnett 2002; Finnemore Sikkink 2001, pp. 391–416.

⁵⁹ Gaddis, John Lewis. *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2000).

⁶⁰ X, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25:4 (July 1947), pp. 566–582.

⁶¹ May, Ernest R. *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Epping: Bedford Books, 1993).

⁶² Gaddis, John Lewis. *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press: 2000); Gaddis. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Gaddis. *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

The Cold War also brought forth a global competition over the identity of the international system. The United States believed deeply that its “way of life” was under threat, and the American-led and shaped international order represented the best system for the world. Underwritten by American power and enlightened and justified by American values, the US promoted a capitalist-driven international system. Each successive administration during the Cold War believed that American values constituted a higher morality in world politics. These values emerged from the state’s revolutionary historical experience.⁶³

Emerging out of revolution in 1789, the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness outlined in the founding documents of the nation, were enshrined in the identity of the nation. Franklin D. Roosevelt considered World War II a struggle for the survival of these values and the future freedom of the world. American post-war architects believed a world where American values and power reigned supreme would underwrite global security and progress. In its international relations in this new era, the US would offer a “New Deal” to the world.⁶⁴

The Soviet Union represented the main roadblock to this new global order. American policymakers considered communism a “moral evil” that threatened to corrupt the world. This identity represented any of the Soviet Union’s conventional and nuclear forces as significant of threat to the US. Policymakers recognized the addictive power of communism, and foresaw how it could lure people to embrace it if the US did not directly contain it globally. The US’s strong and active moral leadership would ensure that such an identity would flounder, and American leadership would prevail.⁶⁵ Thus, for the United States, its competition with the Soviet Union constituted both a struggle over interests, but also a struggle for identity.

Due to the anarchic nature of the system, competition was unavoidable and naturally, regions became the battleground of the Cold War. US policymakers viewed each region as a place where communism needed to be contained. If communism spread to one region or one country in the region, it could spread everywhere. Similar to dominos, if one falls, the rest could fall, and America’s position and its interests hinged on local events around the

⁶³ Gaddis, John Lewis. *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Westad, Odd Arne. *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Young, John W. and John Kent. *International Relations since 1945: A Global History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶⁴ Borgwardt, Elizabeth. *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Harvard University Press: 2005); Mead, Walter Russell. *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

⁶⁵ Gaddis 1998; Westad 2000; Young and Kent 2004.

world.⁶⁶ While the Berlin Wall represented the most enduring and visible symbol of the Cold War, third world regions, not Europe, served as the primary ground for competition and conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁶⁷

The Middle East became a particular focus of US policy planners during the Cold War. The US formed alliances in the region to ensure that a favourable balance of power against communism existed, and to contain the spread of communism. The US actively supported the conservative monarchies of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the republics of Lebanon and Turkey. Israel also served as a key ally against the region's nationalist Soviet satellite states.⁶⁸ In addition to containing communism, the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf resulted in the region becoming an increasingly important area for the United States. Oil, a key underwriter of America's global strength, powered the development, expansion, and sustainment of the US economy.

The states of the region in no way embodied the American ideals of the original founders or the capitalist system that the US sought to cultivate. The conservative monarchies represented one of the oldest forms of governance, but the US recognized that even though these states had a different identity, their identity was antithetical to the Soviet Union and its communist compatriots abroad. The harsh realities of the Cold War forced the US to partner with states with which it often had very little in common except for opposition to the USSR.⁶⁹

Israel represented the most similar state in terms of identity. First, both states were anti-communist, pro-capitalist, and democratic. Except for Lebanon, Israel was the only democracy in the region. Second, both states had a common religious identity. While the United States is not a Jewish state, both states share common Judeo-Christian values and had large Jewish communities that experienced the tragedy of the Holocaust. Israel's turbulent experience after its founding in 1948 represented a modern story of survival. The Jewish community in the United States identified very strongly with Israel's experience. This well-organized community was quite influential in American politics. President Harry Truman recognized Israel in 1948 to secure the Jewish vote in the north-eastern United States, which

⁶⁶ Westad, Odd Arne. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶⁷ Chen Jian. *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁶⁸ Ashton, Nigel J. *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser: Anglo-American Relations and Arab Nationalism, 1955–59* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); Ashton. *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War: The Irony of Interdependence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁶⁹ Walt 1987.

ensured his re-election. The Christian communities in the US also identify strongly with Israel.⁷⁰

The frequency of conflict in the region, most notably the Arab–Israeli conflict, also meant that the United States and the Soviet Union often were drawn into indirect conflict with each other. Their choice of alliances was impacted both by identity and interests. The United States supported the conservative monarchies and democratic states in the region (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, and Israel) while the Soviet Union supported the nationalist regimes in the region (Syria, Egypt, People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen). Conflict between these states raised the risk that a war could break out between the US and the USSR or that one state would gain more influence in the region than the other.⁷¹

American public discourse and foreign policy largely perceived the Arab–Israeli conflict in identity terms, and continues to do so today. Israel—a democracy, an ally of the United States, and the promised land of the Jewish people—faced direct assault by the Palestinian people and its Arab allies, who had no common identity with the United States. In three wars in the name of the Palestinian cause, Israel’s survival was repeatedly challenged. The US could not ignore its perceived moral duty to come to the aid of its common brethren in the face of an assault by the “foreign other.”

The American public discourse conceptualized the Arab identity of the Palestinian people and its Arab allies as foreign and different to the common American–Israeli identity.⁷² For the American people, the Arab–Israeli conflict never was viewed on equal terms, but instead, a conflict where Israel had a more rightful and justifiable position. Finally, the Cold War added a further undertone. The American public and its policymakers perceived Israel

⁷⁰ Mearsheimer, John J. and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); Oren, Michael B. *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Spector, Stephen. *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* (Oxford University Press: 2008); Mead, Walter Russell. “The New Israel and the Old: Why Gentile Americans Back the Jewish State,” *Foreign Affairs* 87:4 (July/August 2008), pp. 28-46.

⁷¹ Gerges, Fawaz A. *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955-1967* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994); Walt 1987; Golan, Galia. *Soviet Policies in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷² Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Said. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage, 2007). Little, Douglas. *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945*, 3rd edition (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

as a democratic, capitalist state on the front line of the battle against Moscow's communist satellites in the region.⁷³

Shaping and ensuring an American-led international system was at the heart of American foreign policy during the Cold War, and sustained the US's active involvement in the regions of the world. Protecting its oil supply, guaranteeing Israel's security, and seeking a favourable balance of power against states that threaten its interests in the region represented the core priorities of the US in the Middle East.

1.4. Syria: The Decline of Identity?

In contrast to the United States, Syria's environment was entirely the Middle East. As a small state in the international system, Syria's interests were inherently local, and its foreign policy orientation reflected this.⁷⁴ Entering the region as an independent state in 1946, Syria emerged as a truncated version of its former self. Its state institutions were weak, its economy constrained, and poor governance hampered its subsequent development. Geopolitically, Syria was particularly vulnerable to outside intervention. As a landlocked nation without any natural barriers, strategic depth or significant manpower, and surrounded by states who at one time or the other challenged the survival of the state, Syria felt particularly vulnerable.⁷⁵

Syria's state identity originates from the region's Arab nationalist identity. Prior to its existence, Syria had no unique state identity that distinguished it from other states in the region. Arab nationalism existed as the only feasible state identity, because it represented the national identity of the state's people. Also, Syria is ethnically and religiously diverse. The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, but a number of minority groups exist. These groups include the Alawites, the Druze, and the Ismailis. Secular Arab nationalism

⁷³ Mearsheimer and Walt 2008; Oren 2008; Spector 2008; Mead 2008; Said, Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage, 1992). For further information on the Arab-Israeli conflict, see: Quandt, William B. *Decade of Decisions: American Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press: 1977); Spiegel, Steven L. *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Khalidi, Rashid. *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007B).

⁷⁴ Hinnebusch, Raymond A. *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 139-165; Hinnebusch 2002; Hinnebusch 2003, pp. 91-154.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

constituted the only identity that could unify these groups together under a single state identity.⁷⁶

In addition, Syria has always felt unsettled by its current state of existence as a result of the actions of the British and French in imposing an artificial state system on the region. The colonial powers carved up the historic Greater Syria, *Al Sham*, into present-day Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. In its post-independence form, Syria represented a mere shadow of its former self. It only proved natural to adopt the national identity as the state identity, instead of fashioning a new state identity that represented the artificially bounded territorial fragment of Syria's former self.⁷⁷

Syria's foreign policy reflected this identity, and it fought for and promoted the causes inherent in its identity. Identity predominated over material interests. Syria fashioned itself as the "beating heart of Arab nationalism" in the Arab world. Ba'thism, the ideology that sought to unify the Arab states, originated in Syria. Syria even forfeited its own state's sovereignty in 1958 in a merger with Egypt, in pursuit of its common identity. The rights of the Palestinian people, a core part of Arab nationalism, drove Syria to constantly struggle against Israel until these rights were recognized.⁷⁸ Syria's foreign policy also reflected the disappointments inherent in its inception as a state. Syria was viewed as the "parent state" of Lebanon. As such, Syria believed it had a special role within the state. Furthermore, Patrick Seale observes as well that a competition for identity existed between "Greater Syria" and "Greater Israel" over the Levant's identity.⁷⁹

Syria's political situation was particularly fluid and unstable. It had a series of governments from 1946 to 1970 that were weak and often vulnerable to street politics, coups, radicalism, and outside interventions. Anarchy existed at times within Syria's domestic sphere, and the changing political elites had to constantly battle opposition parties over foreign policies it wished to pursue. None of these governments were capable of pursuing Syria's *raison d'état* for any extended period of time. The loss of Palestine to Israel and Lebanon to independence were never reconciled in domestic politics. Between 1966 and 1970, the radical wing of the

⁷⁶ Hinnebusch 2002; Hinnebusch 2001, pp. 139-165; Hinnebusch 2003; Seale, Patrick. *The Struggle for Syria* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1986); Seale, Patrick. *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988); Sadowski, Yahya. "The Evolution of Political Identity in Syria." In Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett, eds., *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 137-155.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Hinnebusch 2001, pp. 139-164; Hinnebusch 2003; Seale 1988; Telhami and Barnett 2002, pp. 137-155.

⁷⁹ Seale 1988, pp. 349-350; Interviews with Rifaat al-Asad and Abdul Halim Khaddam, Paris, August 2012.

Ba'thist party actions in government culminated in the 1967 war, and, after its crushing defeat in the war, the loss of the Golan Heights.⁸⁰

The consolidation of the Syrian state under Hafiz al-Asad brought a level of stability to the state. Raymond Hinnebusch characterizes Asad's transformation of the Syrian state as a "revolution from above."⁸¹ Hinnebusch writes that "after 1970, Asad used the army to free himself from party ideological constraints; he built up his *jama'a* — a core of largely Alawite personal followers in the security apparatus — to enhance his autonomy of both party and army."⁸² Asad also began to re-orientate the state to better balance Syria's identity with its strategic interests. He used his strong position within the state to insulate his foreign policy decisions from interference from the public, party, and the army to a large degree.⁸³

Raymond Hinnebusch notes, "In spite of these alteration in identity, Syrians still perceived the Arab states to make up a nation with an overriding national interest that ought to govern their foreign policies. But Syrian leaders gave this less ambitious view of Arabism a distinctly Syro-centric twist: Syria claimed, as the most steadfast of the frontline states in the battle with Israel, to be defending Arab, not purely Syrian, interests."⁸⁴ Hinnebusch concludes that as Asad consolidated the Syrian state in the 1970s, Syria began to pursue a foreign policy characterized more by realism than by identity. However, as this study shows, Asad never lost sight of Syria's position as a leading Arab state, and in pursuit of his foreign policy, pursued his state's interests, but also the interests of the wider community.

But Asad also struck a balance between his responsibilities as an Arab leader and his responsibilities as the president of Syria. Asad carefully measured the pursuit of his goals. He downgraded the objectives of Syria's confrontation with Israel, seeking the return of the Golan Heights and a positive balance of power against threats in the region; he did not believe destroying the state of Israel was feasible. Asad still advocated Palestinian rights, however, and came to their assistance during Black September in 1970.

Unlike previous governments, he was quite uniform in the pursuit of these interests, and did not allow revolutionary revisionism to hijack his foreign policy. He also was strategically flexible. He considered a strong military capability as essential for a strong state, but used

⁸⁰ Hinnebusch 2001, pp. 139–165; Hinnebusch 2003; Seale 1986; Seale 1988; Telhami and Barnett 2002, pp. 137–155.

⁸¹ Hinnebusch 2001.

⁸² Hinnebusch 2002, p. 148.

⁸³ Hinnebusch 2002; Hinnebusch 2001, pp. 139–165; Hinnebusch 2003; Seale 1986; Seale 1988.

⁸⁴ Hinnebusch 2002, p. 143.

various options such as alliances, diplomacy, and military acts to pursue his state's complex foreign policy.

He also deftly used external alliances to make up for his state's limited resources. Its position at the heart of the regional conflict has enabled Syria to form alliances with its neighbours and receive financial support for its position as the main frontline state against Israel. He also sought to manipulate the bipolar condition of the international system to improve the position of his state in the region.⁸⁵ Fashioning his state as an ally of the Soviet Union in the Middle East at times, Asad received large amounts of arms and aid from the Soviets.⁸⁶

Overall, from the 1970s, Hafiz al-Asad adeptly pursued Syria's state interests, and increasingly distanced the state from Syria's Arab nationalist identity. Syria sought alliances in the region to gain an advantageous position, and to advance its interests of consolidating influence in the Levant and challenging Israel. The state remained the leading Arab state to oppose the state of Israel, and consistently advocated for Palestinian rights.

1.5. Features of International Politics: Identity and Interests in US–Syrian Relations

The October War of 1973 had a transformative effect on the region, and caused both the United States and Syria to reassess their relations with states in the region.⁸⁷ US policymakers never considered Syria as a potential partner in the region, and viewed it as a Soviet satellite state that often threatened the security of Israel and caused disturbances in the regional system. Its wide support for Arab nationalist causes often endangered the US's conservative allies in the region. Syria's anti-Israel stance and its support of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) won no allies in Washington.⁸⁸

Equally so for Syria, as a revolutionary state until the 1970s, substantive relations with the United States never seemed desired or achievable. Its state's interests and identity were inherently in opposition to the US's identity and interests in the region. The US's strong support for Israel and the conservative monarchies in the region often put the US on the opposite side of the coalition of states Syria aligned with. After his rise to power and leading

⁸⁵ Hinnebusch 2002; Hinnebusch 2001, oo. 139–165; Hinnebusch 2003; Seale 1986; Seale 1988.

⁸⁶ Karsh, Efraim. *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁸⁷ Stein, Kenneth W. *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab–Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁸⁸ Rabil, Robert G. *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006).

up to the October War of 1973, Asad largely saw the United States as a state he could not trust, and felt threatened by the US's support of Israel. Asad had no intentions of building a relationship with the United States.⁸⁹

The US–Syrian rapprochement in the autumn of 1974, in the wake of the October War, represents a significant change in both states' conceptions of one another and the beginning of US–Syrian relations as an aspect of the international politics of the Middle East.⁹⁰

Identity and interests, natural features of international politics, are useful theoretical concepts for bringing greater analytical and conceptual clarity to their relations. By engaging these two lenses, this study brings a unique and enriched perspective to the study of their relations, and their relations impact on the regional and international politics of the Middle East.

Interests bring to focus Syria's underlying motivations when it engaged in a partnership with the US after decades of hostility, pursued talks with Israel, intervened against its long-time benefactor, the PLO, and maintained indirect and direct control of Lebanon. In the case of the US, interests account for why the state has relations with a state with a deeply opposing identity, and why it allows Syria to have a continued role in Lebanon. Instead of directly intervening in Lebanon, as it did in 1958, the US has chosen to use its relations with Syria to stabilize the country.

Identity brings to light different aspects of their relations. Syria's steadfast support of Palestinian rights during peace talks and its long-time affiliation with and involvement in Lebanon can be understood through its identity. Even as Asad pursued realist foreign policy choices at times, he never completely let go of the responsibilities inherent in Syria's identity. Overall, this framework for analysis conceptualizes of US–Syrian relations, and helps to critically explore the larger questions of this thesis.

⁸⁹ Seale, 1988; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

⁹⁰ Quandt, William B. *Peace Process: American diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Nixon, Richard M. *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 1013; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, June 16, 12:40-1:45 p.m. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, TS 42, Geopolitical File, Syria, November 1973–July 1976.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONSOLIDATION OF SYRIAN POWER IN THE ARAB WORLD

AN ENDURING SECURITY DILEMMA

Since its inception, Syria has been at the forefront of the politics of the Middle East, and from the 1970s, under the leadership of Hafiz al-Asad, Syria became an influential state in the region. As an important powerbroker in the Levant and a main adversary to the state of Israel, Syria remained inextricably tied to the affairs of its neighbours and wielded its power and influence to maintain a central role in the changing and tumultuous regional environment.

A seasoned player of power politics, Syria's formation of alliances both with external powers, including the United States and Soviet Union, and with leading regional powers created an opportunity for Damascus to pursue its interests and check states that sought to curtail its ambitions and isolate it in the region. Not relying on alliances exclusively for its security, Syria's attempt to achieve military parity with Israel ensured its role as an influential material force in the Levant.

Beyond its material power and influence in the region, Syria retained its symbolic position as a leading champion of Arab nationalism in the region. As the birthplace of the Ba'th Party and the remaining frontline state that challenged Israel after the 1973 war, Syria helped shape the wider discourse of the region and remained at the centre of the political issues facing the Levant in the 1970s.

Syria's ascendance in the 1970s was not expected, however. Since its inception, Syria has faced an enduring security dilemma: How does it reconcile a weak geopolitical position with an insatiable irredentist identity and also guard against the state from being ripped apart from within by its own identity?

Too often, studies of Syria's foreign policy emphasize *realpolitik* in the conduct of Damascus' foreign policy and downplay the role identity plays in shaping the state after its consolidation in the 1970s. By doing so, these studies fail to understand the heart of Syria's

security dilemma. On the other hand, studies that purely look at identity often miss the structural factors that contribute to its security dilemma.¹

While material and identity factors shape Syria's interactions with its environment, a regime's leadership is an important factor in managing these factors. The rise of Syria in the international politics of the Middle East in the 1970s has as much to do with leadership as state survival.

Hafiz al-Asad attempted to address Syria's security dilemma by using authoritarian stability at home to allow Syria to play a role in the region. Authoritarian stability, despite its flaws, ensured a leading position for Syria in the politics of the Middle East. This stability allowed a country that was largely at the mercy of its regional environment prior to the 1970s due its geopolitical position and identity to address its own position better than predecessor governments, which were less insulated domestically from the regional environment at great costs to both the society and the economy.

Asad's legacy is that he consolidated the nation-state in Syria and brought balance to Syria's identity and its national interests. This process of state-building allowed Syria to more effectively address its interests and its security dilemma than at any time prior to his presidency. While Hafiz al-Asad transformed Syria's role in the region and ensured Syria's interests, he failed to permanently address Syria's long-term international and domestic security dilemma. This dilemma was a constant source of concern throughout his presidency, and an important reason why he sought to engage the United States after the 1973 war.

This chapter examines the origins of Syria's security dilemma and how the state responded to it prior to the rise of Hafiz al-Asad. It looks then at how Hafiz al-Asad's rule addressed the domestic instability aspect of Syria's security dilemma. Finally, it looks at how President Asad envisioned his foreign policy as he entered the 1970s. Overall, this chapter examines the main drivers of Hafiz al-Asad's foreign policy as he entered the turbulent politics of the 1970s.

¹ Telhami, Shibley and Michael Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Hinnebusch, Raymond. "The Foreign Policy of Syria." In Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

2.1. The Origins of Syria's Security Dilemma

2.1.1. Syria's identity is inextricably linked with the region's identity

Syria's identity is inseparably tied to the post-World War I Middle East, and its creation is a pivotal story in the formation of the contemporary state system in the Middle East. Its identity has influenced the region, and has also become defined by the region itself.²

Syria's role in the formation of the new Middle East began in final days of the Ottoman Empire. To secure assistance from the Ottoman *wilayahs* in the Middle East during World War I, Britain promised the Hashemite family the leading role in forming the new political order in the region after the defeat of the Ottoman Turks. The Great Arab Revolt, led by the Hashemite's patriarch, Sheriff Hussein bin Ali, from 1916 to 1918 succeeded in driving the Ottoman Turks out of the region and positioned the Hashemites as the natural successors to the Ottomans in ruling the newly independent Middle East.³

For less than two years, under the rule of Hashemite King Faisal, Syria was the centre of gravity in the new political order in the Arab world. Damascus served as the intellectual heart of Arab nationalism, and the focal point of the renaissance of the Arab state in the region. Unbeknownst to the Hashemites, negotiations between Paris and London culminated in the Sykes–Picot Agreement and the San Moreno Conference that robbed the region of its brief independence, and imposed on it French and British colonial rule. By 1921, the former *wilayahs* of the Levant became portioned into Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan (present-day Jordan), and Israel and Palestine. King Faisal's dream of a united Arab world under his leadership was shattered and soon to be ousted from Damascus by French forces.

In 1923, France formed the new state of Syria out of several Ottoman *wilayahs* that once encompassed the lands of Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, and the nascent state only represented a small fraction of these lands. Paris also gave special "state status" to both the Alawites and the Druze in Syria, and divided the administration of the remainder part of the new Syria between French colonial administrators in Damascus and Aleppo.⁴ France even ceded Alexandretta and areas surrounding Aleppo to Turkey in 1938, further tearing apart

² Dawisha, Adeed. *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³ Seale, Patrick. *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Rogan, Eugene. *The Arabs: A History* (London: Allen Lane, 2009); Hitti, Philip K. *History of Syria, Including Lebanon and Palestine* (London: Gorgias Press, 1951).

⁴ Shields, Sarah D. *Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Barbir, Karl K. *Ottoman Rule in Damascus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

the historic boundaries of Greater Syria. The lands of historic Syria thus became lost in the new political map of the Middle East.⁵ From its inception, Syrian elites never considered these divisions legitimate and viewed it as a Western colonial imposition that robbed Syria of its rightful independent place in the region and left the state in a weakened and artificial position. Syria thus naturally rejected the new statist identity.

French mandatory rule only reinforced the absence of a statist identity and the irredentist nature of Syria's identity. By ruling Syria through the manipulation of local elites and separate colonial administrations, France found it easier to play the elites within Syria off of one another than to create strong national institutions or implant a centralized system of governance. In addition, Paris predominantly staffed the Syrian colonial legions with Alawites and Druze instead of building a true national army, because they did not trust the majority Sunni population within the French mandate. This strategy of local elite manipulation and separate administrations only served to strengthen the sub-national identities and regional identities within the state. Thus, from its independence in 1946, Syria struggled to define itself in relation to itself and the region..⁶

Tension existed also between the leading notables of Damascus and Aleppo over which city should have the most power in this state, making the notables of the early governments of Syria and their constituents in the late 1940s and early 1950s focused more on preserving their sub-state identities and privileges than nation-building. Responding to this absence of a state identity, the post-independence governments chose and actively promoted variations of Arab nationalism as the identity of the new state. The governments and the army, an active force in Syrian domestic politics, were keenly aware of the loose bonds that united the new Syria.⁷

Ba'thism ("renaissance" in Arabic) emerged as the predominant post-war Arab nationalist and socialist intellectual political movement in Syria and the Levant by the late 1950s. The intellectual founders of this ideology were Michel Aflaq, Zaki al-Arsuzi, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. The early embrace of socialism by the Ba'th Party in the 1950s also gave this party

⁵ Pipes, Daniel. *Greater Syria: The history of an ambition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶ Yapp, M.E. *The Near East Since the First World War: A History to 1995*, 2nd edition (London: Longman, 1996); Cleveland, William L. and Martin Bunton. *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 4th revised edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009); Khoury, P.S. *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁷ Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples: With a New Afterword*, new edition (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010); Seale, Patrick. *The Struggle for Syria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Batatu, Hanna. "Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and Causes for its Dominance," *Middle East Journal* 35:1 (Summer 1981); Bodman, Herbert L. *Political Factions in Aleppo, 1760–1826* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1963).

a wider constituency beyond the urban notables that traditionally dominated Syrian politics. Aflaq argued that socio-economic reforms and the creation of a larger pan-Arab state, based around a common national identity, could lead to the region's renewal and a break from its dependency on the West. In competition with Ba'thism, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) promoted an Arab nationalist ideology focused on re-uniting the lands of Greater Syria. Arab nationalist ideologies, backed by factions of the Syrian elite including the army officer corps, became the identities of the new state at the expense of a coherent statist Syrian identity.⁸

The new states of the Levant and the eastern Arab world identified deeply with the Arab nationalist ideas emanating from Cairo under Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Damascus' Ba'th Party that challenged the Western-imposed political order of the region. A profound and burning sense of irredentism became an inherent feature of these post-colonial states, and the search for a unified wider Arab political state dominated the discourse and policies amongst and within these states as they entered the 1970s. Even with the rise of more statist identities in the region and the departure from these unity projects, the Arab nationalist identity continued to resonate in the region, even without a political unity aspect to it.⁹

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 further sharpened the resonance of this Arab nationalist identity amongst elites and ordinary citizens in the Arab world. To compound the imposition of these new artificial boundaries, Britain, unable to control Palestine, handed the responsibility of the mandate to the UN, which approved the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The new Jewish homeland in the heart of the lands of the Levant, formed at the expense of the Arab people of Palestine, sent shockwaves throughout the Arab world, most noticeably in Syria. The land of Greater Syria now had a Jewish state imposed on it. The loss of Palestine, the Arab world's *Nakba* (catastrophe), became the central political cause for the Arab world, and features as an essential aspect of this identity. The incompetence of Syria's newly elected government in responding to the 1948 war (in particular, providing poor equipment to the military) led to the defeat of the young Syrian military, but also a new chance for them to actively intervene in Syrian politics for the first time — which they did in

⁸ Seale 1987; Dawisha 2005; Mufti, Malik. *Sovereign Creations: Pan-Arabism and Political Order in Syria and Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Khoury, P.S. *Urban notables and Arab Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Abu Jaber, Kamel S. *The Arab Ba'th Socialist Party: History, Ideology, and Organization* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1966).

⁹ Dawisha 2005.

1949. Thus, Syria has from its inception had a special responsibility in fighting for and promoting the rights of the Palestinians.¹⁰

Syria's identity thus naturally and inevitably has interlinked the state with the regional environment. In the case of Syria, there is an organic link between identity and interests. Some scholars have viewed identity and interests as either—or in driving a state's foreign policy, but for Syria, identity and interests are inseparable from one another. As one of the early intellectual spaces for Arab nationalism, Syrian elites have considered the state a centre of Arab nationalism. It could not turn its back on the region, and as a result, Syria had to play a role within it that has put it at the forefront of the politics of the region. Notably, no other state bore the costs of this identity as much as Syria, and no other state's policies and behaviours had been so closely tied to this identity. While other states in the region have moved towards more statist identities in the 1970s, Syria continued to carry the mantle of Arab nationalism and championed the region's wider identity, which is inherently its identity.

2.1.2. Syria's geopolitical position in the Middle East

Syria's geopolitical position alone would put it at the centre of the politics of the Middle East. As Patrick Seale perceptively notes, "the strategic position of Syria, guarding the north-eastern approaches to Egypt, the overland route to Iraq from the Mediterranean, the head of the Arabian Peninsula and the northern frontier of the Arab world," ensures that any regional or international actor seeking to influence and control the region or preventing another state from gaining dominance naturally courts Syria.¹¹

Syria has proven to be irresistible to its neighbours at times: Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Israel, and indeed to the wider region, most notably Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Each of these states has sought a role in the internal affairs of Syria, going as far as Egypt and Iraq that sought a political union with Syria in the 1950s and 1960s. Turkey and Israel have also partitioned Syrian territory.¹² Due to the proximity and number of neighbours, problems in these states also have the potential to spill over in Syria. For example, Beirut is only 50 or so miles from Damascus, and Lebanon's fragile and dysfunctional political system, as illustrated by the

10 Shlaim, Avi. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: Penguin Press, 2001); Shlaim, Avi. *Israel and Palestine: Reappraisals, Revisions, Refutations* (London: Verso, 2010); Shlaim, Avi and Eugene Rogan. *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Pappé, Ilan. *The Making of the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1947–1951* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992); Morris, Benny. *1948: A History of the First Arab–Israeli War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Seale 1987, p. 1.

¹² Mufti 1996.

Lebanese civil war of 1958, has resulted in Lebanon serving as a constant ground for regional intrigue and interference. Syria's actions in the region must be understood within this context.¹³

Syria's geopolitical position makes the state vulnerable to more powerful neighbours: it has a small population, no natural boundaries for protection, no large seawater harbours, and a land barren of rich natural resources. Syria's economy, structurally weak and resource dependent, leaves the state in a disadvantaged position. Critically, Syria faces a declining water table that has proven to be a serious dilemma for the government in Damascus. Having a predominantly agrarian economy and very little industrial output, water is a necessary lifeline for the countryside, and droughts have complicated Syria's economic growth.¹⁴

Heavily reliant on a socialized, public-sector-fuelled economy during the 1970s, Syria limited its own economic growth and stymied innovation. This public economy created a regime-dependent middle and upper class, but in the process limited access to the economy except for through government positions and state-owned industries. This process resulted in a large remittance economy, where Syrians had to seek jobs outside Syria to support their families.¹⁵

With the government seen as the primary provider of economic access and enterprise, a large burden had been placed on it to meet its obligations. Its own oil resources never adequately sustained its public sector economy and, as such, Syria relied on economic aid from Saudi Arabia. The state has instead largely relied on regional trade to market its goods, and for products and services the state itself cannot provide. (It traded in particular with Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq). Syria thus never benefited from a strong economy, which is critical for any strong geopolitical position.¹⁶

¹³ Lesch, David W. *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar Al Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Gendzier, Irene L. *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon, 1945–1958* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Kliot, N. *Water Resources and conflict in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1994); Lowi, M.R. *Water and Power: the Politics of a scarce resource in the Jordan River Basin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Wakil, M. "Analysis of Future Water Crisis in Syria," submitted for publication in Research Journal, Engineering Division, University of Aleppo (Aleppo, Syria: University of Aleppo Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Perthes, Volker. *The political economy of Syria under Asad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995); Batatu, Hanna. *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Hinnebusch, Raymond. *Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba'thist Syria: The Political Economy of Rural Development* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989).

To compound these vulnerabilities, the diversity of groups in Syria opened the door for other states to meddle in its internal affairs and the potential for these groups to seek outside assistance in their own political contestation within the state. A predominantly Sunni population with diverse minority populations of Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Kurds, Syria has always had an ethnically rich and diverse population, but one without a natural national identity. A profound sense of vulnerability from the diversity of groups within the state remains a constant source of anxiety for any government in Damascus.¹⁷

For a state, holding an identity with such deep expectations and commitments intrinsic to it, Syria naturally is not in a favourable geopolitical political position to fulfil this role. Its domestic environment, limited by its resource-weak economy and the fragility of its multi-ethnic society, and combined with an often turbulent and unstable regional environment, create an ever-present security dilemma for the Syrian leadership. Syria's foreign policy must be understood within this context. It is too limited a view to simply see Syria as a troublemaker in the region.

This gap between its inescapable identity and its geopolitical capabilities has proven to be a central dilemma for successive Syrian leadership. As Flynt Leverett, a former US National Security Council official, perceptively notes, "Little about Syria's natural endowments would lead an analyst to predict that it would have such a central role in Middle Eastern affairs. By most indicators of strategic importance — including size, internal cohesiveness, and wealth — Syria would seem destined to be no more than a minor player, relatively easy for greater powers inside and outside the region to marginalize and ignore."¹⁸ The politics of the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s represented a period where even though Syria was a weak, unstable, and at times marginalized state, few states could ignore it.

2.1.3. The Prize of Arab Nationalism: A Period of Instability and Disorder

Prior to the consolidation of the modern state under Hafiz al-Asad, Syria's absence of a strong leadership ensured that it was vulnerable to its weak geopolitical position and the risky attraction of its identity. The state lacked any political stability — more than 20 different governments rose and fell — and it never had the strength to resist the allure and temptation of its identity. Competition for power amongst a number of political groups and the military resulted in a series of governments that never had an opportunity, capacity or, at

¹⁷ Lawson, Fred H. "Domestic Transformations and Foreign Steadfastness in Contemporary Syria," *Middle East Journal* 48 (Winter 1994), pp. 47–64; Hinnebusch, Raymond. *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Van Dam, Nikolaos. *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹⁸ Leverett, Flynt. *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2005), p. 1.

times, desire to create a fully functioning, insular state. From 1946 to 1961, Syria served as the centre stage for Arab unity projects. Syria, unable to exercise any of its own leadership in the region, was exploited by Iraq and Egypt.¹⁹

In their quest for regional hegemony, Iraq and Egypt — two of the strongest states in the region, jockeyed over who could control Syria, the sought-after prize of Arab nationalism, during the Arab Cold War. Both states, key proponents of Arab nationalism and influenced by the ideas born in Damascus, knew that they could never claim leadership of the Arab nationalist identity without co-opting Syria. Leadership of this identity would ensure their victory over the other and their hegemony in the Arab world, and position them well to challenge Israel.²⁰

Syria's different political groups, jockeying for power in the unstable domestic political environment, helped open the space for these powers to meddle in its affairs. Cairo and Baghdad sought domestic parties to advance their interests, and different parties, seeing unity as both an ideal and a way to advance their own political position, entertained outside neighbours' interests in the state. Iraq proved initially an amenable suitor for the Syrian Social Nationalist Party because of the strong trade ties starting from the days of the Ottoman Empire, but Baghdad never fully reconciled what a union truly meant in practice and lost influence with the rise of leftist and socialist parties in Syria and the decline of the SSNP. Notably, to a lesser degree of success, as Egypt and Iraq competed for regional hegemony; their potential spoilers, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, had their own political designs to counter-act Iraq's and Egypt's efforts. But these efforts bore them little success in Syria.²¹

Despite this overt meddling and these unity designs, prior to 1958 the governments of Syria remarkably insulated themselves from being taken over by Syria's neighbours. One may have expected this chaos to produce the opposite, but, notably, Syria's governments, once in power, adeptly used the pan-Arab projects as a way to strengthen their position within the state at the expense of their domestic opponents and refused to enter unity projects, which put Syria's interests below the interests of its partner states. If Arab unity were to occur, it would have to be beneficial to the regime, and the various governments proved reluctant to

¹⁹ Mufti 1996; Seale 1987.

²⁰ Ibid; Dawisha 2005.

²¹ Seale 1987.

cede its sovereignty entirely. Malik Mufti aptly terms this behaviour as “defensive unionism.”²²

To undercut the strength of the government, at the same time opposition groups entertained other potential partners for unity. The military, factionalized by different political divisions with different designs, played a critical role in preventing any one unity project from gaining much traction as well. Thus, this competition for power within the state unintentionally helped decrease the possibility of an outside state forming a union with Syria.²³

Syria’s one notable divergence, its unity with Egypt in 1958, marked the only time that Damascus ever ceded its sovereignty to another state for the cause of Arab nationalism. The formation of the United Arab Republic represented the first and only time two Arab states united as one, and symbolized, importantly, the strength and commitment of Syria’s Arab nationalist identity, as well as Egypt’s victory over Iraq. For Nasser, who reluctantly agreed to it, this union marked the first step in uniting the whole region. For Syria’s Ba’th party, which misjudged the extent of this unity and felt threatened by the Cold War competition occurring in Syria between the USSR and the United States and its domestic opponents (including the Communists, who the Ba’th initially supported), this union initially represented an opportunity to advance and achieve the long-held aspirations and dreams of Arab unity. The Ba’th party also hoped the union would mark the consolidation of its authority over the chaotic political space in Syria.²⁴

Nasser’s pre-eminence in the Arab world placed Syria directly into the milieu of the region. Tied to Nasser’s Egypt from 1958 to 1961, Syria remained at the forefront of Arab politics, and at the heart of the Arab Cold War between conservative states aligned with the West and irredentist socialist states aligned with the Soviet Union.²⁵ Syria’s willingness to cede its state sovereignty for Arab nationalism solidified its credentials as one of the most ardent, legitimate, and symbolic supporters of Arab nationalism. It also symbolized the first marked departure from its own geographically ordained path. Instead of becoming a leading state in the region, Syria tethered itself to a leading state.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mufti 1996; Van Dam 2011.

²⁴ Dawisha 2005; Jankowski, James P. *Nasser's Egypt, Arab nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 2002); Nutting, Anthony. *Nasser* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972); Kienle, Eberhard. *Ba'th versus Ba'th: The conflict between Syria and Iraq, 1968–1989* (London: I.B Tauris, 1991).

²⁵ Kerr, Malcolm H. *The Arab Cold War: Gamel 'Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-70*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

The unity with Egypt broke in 1961 with Syria's increasing recognition that its position as a junior partner to Egypt was no longer sustainable either economically or politically. However, the rupture of this union did not dampen Syria's strong feelings of its Arab nationalist identity. Attempts were made to unite with the Ba'th Party in Iraq and again with Egypt in the 1960s, but they failed due to differences over the conception of an Arab unity and leadership differences. The deep ideological and political divide between the Ba'th Party led to a deep and caustic split between the Ba'th parties in Syria and Iraq in 1966. No longer tethered to a strong state, Syria was forced to confront its profound vulnerability and weakness in the region once again.²⁶

2.2. The Rescue of the Nation-State

2.2.1. State maximization and leveraging under Hafiz al-Asad's presidential security state

The instability of the 1960s, marked by in-fighting within the Ba'th Party and the military, culminating first in the humiliating defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel and the loss of the Golan Heights, and then Syria's confrontation with Jordan in September of 1970, created an opportunity for new leadership to emerge. The defeat of 1967 laid bare the reality that the turbulence of Syria's domestic situation neither ensured its internal security or stability nor its position in the region. Unlike at other times, when instability in Syria only produced further instability, a senior Ba'thist army officer, Hafiz al-Asad, seized the opportunity to bring fundamental change to Syria in 1970. Tired of the deepening radical politics and foreign policies that had dominated the Ba'th Party since it came to power in 1963 and a growing disagreement with other members of the senior officer corps affiliated with the Ba'th Party after the 1967 War, Asad seized control in a military coup and had fully consolidated his position within the Ba'th Party by 1971 (See Chapter 4, Section 9 for a more detailed discussion of this period). In an attempt to distinguish this party coup from the party coup in 1968, which he had also participated in, Asad termed this new coup and the subsequent consolidation of his position in the state the "corrective movement."²⁷

²⁶ Dawisha 2005; Mufti 1996; Jankowski 2002; Abu Jaber 1966; Seale 1987; Palmer, Monte. "The United Arab Republic: An Assessment of Its Failure," *Middle East Journal* 20 (1966), pp. 50–67; Podeh, Elie. *The Decline of Arab Unity: The Rise And Fall of the United Arab Republic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999); Stephens, Robert. *Nasser: A Political Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971); Batatu, Hanna. *The Old Social Classes & The Revolutionary Movement In Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2004).

²⁷ Hinnebusch 2001; Van Dam 2011; Seale, Patrick. *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988); Ma'oz, Moshe. *Asad: the Sphinx of Damascus*

Asad brought leadership and vision to Syria that had been absent in the decades following the state's independence. In understanding contemporary Syria, the state must be understood in the context and legacy of Hafiz al-Asad. He personally transformed Syria under his one-man rule, from an impaired, vulnerable, and weak state to a nation-state that remained stable at home and was able to pursue its interests abroad.

Importantly, Asad's position did not rest solely on strong leadership, but on iron-fisted authoritarian leadership and coercion. His one-man rule of Syria brought the state the stability it had lacked in the decades after independence, but at the expense of creating a state that had broad political participation and an open and inclusive civil society. Syria emerged as an influential state in its environment through his authoritarian leadership. As the sole decision-maker, his own perceptions, biases, interests, and judgments naturally impacted the formulation and implementation of Syria's foreign policy, particularly in regards to ending the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights. Even though the Alawite identity was not the dominant identity of the state, Asad linked the survival of his Alawite community to his rule, and thus made his community dependent on his rule. He sought to ensure a privileged position for his community above any other communities in Syria.²⁸

Unlike Nasser or Sadat or Saddam, who imbued a lot of charisma and centred their cult of personality around that, Asad lacked charisma and instead often came across, as Roger Owen notes, as a president who "exhibited a quiet, deliberative persona, almost always wearing a suit and tie, slow of speech, his body stooped and his movements sluggish."²⁹ To make up for his lack of physical charisma, Lisa Wedeen argues Asad employed a strategy of domination — employing soaring rhetoric and enthusiasm — resting on "compliance rather than legitimacy" which forced Syrians to act "as if [they] revered" Asad without actually wholeheartedly believing it. This cult of personality he forged tried to set his presidency above society. Because this experience was not very organic, Wedeen argues it enabled Asad to manipulate the "reality" in the state to meet his needs in response to different circumstances.³⁰

Even though political participation was quite controlled, Hafiz al-Asad, similar to other Arab leaders, keenly believed that sovereignty came from the people and that his state — along

(London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998); Rabinovich, Itamar. *Syria under the Ba'ath, 1963–1966: The Army-Party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem, 1972).

²⁸ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad, August 2012, Paris, France.

²⁹ Owen, Roger. *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 34; Wedeen, Lisa. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 29.

³⁰ Wedeen 1999, p. 6.

the lines of the Jacobian model — had to have institutions, a constitution, and the rule of law to give the appearance of popular legitimacy. That was different from his predecessors' style of governance. It is no surprise, then, that in 1971 Asad held a presidential election, which gave him an overwhelming mandate to govern the country. However, Roger Owen argues that “while it had the initial merit of distancing new regimes from their monarchical and colonial pasts, it would seem likely that, over time, what really matters was the enormous license that the manipulation of the notion of the sovereignty of the people appeared to give to presidents when it came to legitimizing their own personal rule.”³¹ Owen further notes that in many cases, the rulers came to believe that their rule legitimately represented the will of their people and could not believe there was a legitimate opposition at times.³² Thus, for the new state, while elections were held for the Assembly and for the president and bills were passed in the Assembly, these actions were largely procedural, similar to the largely symbolic policy debates and meetings within the Ba’th Party itself.

Centralising authority around himself, Asad transformed Syria’s unstable political system into a one-party state that was fully subordinate to his presidential rule. As Raymond Hinnebusch notes, Syria became a “presidential monarchy” through a “revolution from above.” In full command of the army and the security services, he cleansed the Ba’th Party of the divisions that had destabilized it for much of its history, and transformed the party into the political force of his rule. Ba’athism in Syria, which prior to his consolidation of power had a number of intellectual strands, became subordinate to him and his vision.³³

The new constitution of 1973 banned all political participation except for through the Ba’th Party and put all state power in the hands of the presidency. By integrating the state bureaucracy with the Ba’th Party, Asad made the party the entry point into positions within state institutions, and the party became responsible for directly implementing his will and carrying out the administration of the country. A group of technocrats were appointed to ministerial positions within the state, but in all reality the Ba’th Party, according to Abdul Halim Khaddam, a senior Ba’ath Party member, merely became a tool of political organization, legitimacy, and implementation for the president, instead of a source for actual policy formulation.³⁴

³¹ Owen 2012, pp. 23-24.

³² Owen 2012, p. 24.

³³ Hinnebusch 2001; Batatu 1999; Ziadeh, Radwan. *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

³⁴ Owen 2012, Ch. 2; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

The army and the affiliated security services, which always had a degree of senior membership in the Ba'th Party, became interlinked with the Ba'th Party as well and became the backbone of his rule. Senior military officers were given top positions in the party. He professionalized the army by purging it of political divisions, and making it, as well as the security services, responsible both for ensuring his regime's security and for protecting it from its regional environment.³⁵

To ensure the security of his regime, Asad extensively built up the security services in his state, and used the Emergency Law of 1963 to liberally suppress any dissent. In order to ensure that the security services could never develop as a potential threat to his rule, he set up four separate, and at times competing, security services to ensure that no one agency could ever challenge his personal authority. He also used an extensive network of informers to watch for any dissent in the state, and also used the Ba'th Party to keep tabs on the military and the security services by installing political commissars into the ranks of the military. Both the security services and the army became a useful avenue for employing unemployed youth in the state as well, and conscription ensured that all Syrian men had the experience of being indoctrinated into the state's ruling philosophy. To further entrench loyalty to him within the army and the security services and protect his own personal community, members of Asad's Alawite sect received top posts. He also gave the army and the security services access to the economy, and their political loyalty in turn brought them wealth. A number of business partnerships occurred between senior Alawite officers and leading members of the Sunni urban business community.³⁶

To consolidate his popular support base and co-opt Syria's diverse groups under the rule of a president from a minority sect, Hafiz al-Asad implemented a socialized economy with some private enterprise and liberalization, which guaranteed that the state held the keys to economic and social progress, in particular through the creation of Ba'thist labour and industrial unions and the allocation of business contracts to individuals loyal to the regime. In order for Syria's diverse groups to prosper, they had to seek favour from the regime in Damascus. Oil subsidies from the Gulf further reinforced the state's ability to spread economic patronage. Membership in the Ba'th Party ensured economic patronage and access to this economy and, as a result, the party served as a large, unifying support network for Syria's diverse population. These reforms created a new business upper and middle class

³⁵ Owen 2012, Ch. 1; Hinnebusch 2001; Van Dam 2011.

³⁶ Hinnebusch, Raymond. *Authoritarian Power in Ba'thist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Owen 2012, Ch. 2–4; Ziadeh 2012; Batatu, 1999; Interview with Rifaat al-Asad.

dependent on the regime for their survival, and gave the signs of economic growth and progress in the transformed state.³⁷

Asad's institutional overhaul of the state gave him domestic stability and security to allow him to re-orientate Syria's foreign policy. The changing regional environment in the 1970s created an opportunity for Syria to play an influential role in regional politics.³⁸

2.2.2. Syria's New Foreign Policy

Asad introduced a style of presidential management that made him the predominant decision-maker on all matters of foreign policy and national security. As Roger Owen notes:

The President himself — a secretive, extremely hard working [working as long as 14 hours a day], austere, and, on occasions, ruthless man — proceeded to create a personal system of management based on personal aloofness (his main form of communication was the telephone), an intimidating manner, and a complicated balancing act between the representatives of different institutions and component parts of his new regime. It was and is a system usefully described as a kind of personalized corporatism for which only the president and a few close advisors know all the key relations between its component parts.³⁹

Hafiz al-Asad used this strengthened and stable position at home and the changing regional environment to bring more order, control, and rationality to Syria's foreign policy. Asad understood the art of power politics and the complexity and vulnerability of Syria's position in the region. He identified with his state's Arab nationalist identity, but understood as well the limitations and costs of this identity. This identity-charged foreign policy had led to costly wars, economic ruin, and the exploitation of Syria by regional powers. The interests of the Syrian people were often sacrificed in the process, and the Syrian people wanted change.⁴⁰

Prior to Asad, foreign policymaking in Syria did not involve any clear strategic thinking. It reflected the foreign policy of a weak, instable, highly penetrated state. The multiple governments were too insecure at home to have the opportunity to focus on Syria's role and interests in the world, and often used foreign policy as a tool of competition with other political interests within the state. Thus, foreign policymaking was often reactionary to

³⁷ Hinnebusch 2001; Perthes 1995; Batatu 1999; Van Dam 2011; Heydeman, Steven. *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and social conflict, 1946–1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

³⁸ Seale 1988; Ma'oz, Moshe, Joseph Ginat, and Onn Winckler, eds. *Modern Syria: From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in the Middle East* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999).

³⁹ Owen 2012, p. 84; Haddad, Bassam. "Asad and After: Syria between continuity and change," paper presented at Georgetown University, October 11, 2003; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

⁴⁰ Seale, 1988; Hinnebusch 2002; Interview with Rifaat al-Asad.

political events in Syria. Political ideology ruled over pragmatism in decision-making, and this led to disastrous results for Syria.⁴¹

The new president sought to bring stability to Syria's foreign policy, and understood that Syria's interests could only be achieved through the pragmatic use of power. Asad recognized that any change in Syria's foreign policy direction had to be framed in the discourse of the state's Arab nationalist identity. Even though one-man rule dominated the politics of the state, Asad recognized the strength of the state's entrenched Arab nationalist identity and how it could both legitimize and delegitimize his rule depending on his actions. No leader, even in the Arab world, has ever been completely insulated from public opinion, and the Arab nationalist ideology of his party served as a key link between his regime and the identity of the state.⁴²

Hafiz al-Asad was also a deeply committed Arab nationalist personally, and this identity influenced his decision-making in relation to Syria's foreign policy. He joined the Ba'th Party in his twenties, and rejected any vision of Syria that precluded Syria's role as a leading Arab state.⁴³ In 1984, when President Carter visited President Asad, he recalled:

As Assad stood in front of the brilliant scene [of the painting of the Hittin Battle] and discussed the history of the Crusaders and the other ancient struggles of the Holy Land, he took particular pride in retelling the tales of Arab successes, past and present. He seemed to speak like a modern Saladin, feeling that it was his dual obligation to rid the region of all foreign presence while preserving Damascus as the only focal point of Arab unity today.⁴⁴

Edward Djerejian, a long-serving American ambassador in the Middle East stationed in Damascus from 1988 to 1991, noted how fervent the memory of the Sykes–Picot Agreement was in the mind of the Syrian president:

During my three years in Damascus, Assad subjected me to countless narratives about how the Sykes-Picot Agreement was the origin of all the ills of the contemporary Middle East. He would explain that the British and French colonialists drew lines in the sands of the region to stake out their respective territorial mandates. Sykes was the British agent and Picot the French agent who colluded in this master imperialist scheme. The French had an interest in creating “Greater Lebanon” and consolidating a multireligious state, giving the Christian community there a prominent political role among the Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities and the Druze community. This “scheme,” according to Assad, was at Syria's expense. He considered Syria and Lebanon one nation, which is why he never moved to permit the opening of a Syrian

⁴¹ Mufti 1996; Seale 1987; Interviews with Rifaat al-Asad and Abdul Halim Khaddam.

⁴² Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad.

⁴³ Interview with Rifaat al-Asad.

⁴⁴ Carter, Jimmy. *Blood of Abraham* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

embassy in Beirut or a Lebanese Embassy in Damascus. For him, both countries constituted Greater Syria, one Arab nation.⁴⁵

Djerejian also noted Asad's deep resentment of Western "imperialism" in the region:

Assad harboured a deep-seated resentment against the French colonialists. He once mentioned how, as a young boy, he had felt angry at seeing French troops in Syrian streets and humiliated by their occupation of his country. He was equally resentful of the British mandate over Palestine and the creation of a Jewish homeland, regarding these as further manifestations of Western imperialism in the hear of the Arab world...Only after these historical narratives were conveyed would we be able to address current issues.⁴⁶

From his conversations with Asad, he observed as well the organic link in Asad's mind between Western imperialism and Israel: "In his historical view and as a pan-Arab nationalist, [Asad] opined that the Israelis were largely foreign and Western transplants in the Arab world. He considered them akin to the French and British colonialists who carved up the Middle East."⁴⁷

Ambassador Djerejian stressed that these statements were not superficial rhetoric, but the how Asad perceived his state's identity: "I learned early on that what seemed to be ramblings were more often than not, at least in his mind, poignant political messages, directed especially to Western interlocutors."⁴⁸

In addition, the vulnerability of the state never escaped his mind and the president sought to use Syria's strengthened position to ensure that its neighbours remained at bay, and at the same time prevent instability in neighbouring states from spreading to Syria. Even with the consolidation of the state, this awareness of Syria's security dilemma has been a constant factor in the psychology of Syria's ruling elite.⁴⁹

Hafiz al-Asad used the stability at home to look outwards as he believed that Syria was in a better position to influence and shape the politics of the region. The Syrian president sought to chart Syria on a new, independent course, breaking from its past position in the region.⁵⁰

2.2.3. The Centrality of Alliances

⁴⁵ Djerejian, Edward P. *Danger and Opportunity: An American Ambassador's Journey through the Middle East* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2008), pp. 90-91.

⁴⁶ Djerejian 2008, p. 91.

⁴⁷ Djerejian 2008, p. 90

⁴⁸ Djerejian 2008, p. 91.

⁴⁹ Seale 1988; Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Hafiz al-Asad understood that Syria's natural limitations could be addressed through a leveraging of the regional and international order to its advantage. The construction of alliances thus became a critical aspect of Syria's new foreign policy and a key source of its strength.⁵¹

During the Cold War, Syria attempted to manipulate the bipolarity of the international system to strengthen its position in the Middle East.⁵² Syria's Ba'hist credentials made it an attractive state from which Moscow could cultivate its position in the region. Moscow's strong support of Syria through economic and military aid, beginning in 1955, proved invaluable for Asad, who sought to defensively balance against Israel and contain its influence in the Levant. It is quite important to note that even though the Ba'th Party had banned the Communist Party in Syria by 1963, Moscow relied more on regimes with common interests than ones that shared a common identity in its competition with the United States in the Third World. Soviet support transformed Asad's military into one of the strongest armed forces in the region in his push for military parity with Israel, and this proved decisive for Syria's ambitions in the region.

Syria's relationship with the United States has proved crucial at times, but also the most difficult. Unlike the relationship between Syria and the Soviet Union, which had a history of aligned interests and ideological affinity, the relationship with the United States was practically non-existent prior to 1973. But Syria, recognizing its disadvantaged position in the region after the 1973 war, made the strategic choice of engaging the United States to achieve its interests in the region. Putting aside ideological divisions, Asad, unlike his predecessors, recognized that *realpolitik* often forced Syria to have unexpected bedfellows. By engaging both superpowers, Asad understood that Syria's interests could best be advanced through the careful management and manipulation of alliances to his state's own advantage.⁵³

During the 1970s, Syria largely had weak relations with its neighbours in the Arab world. Its newly emerged position in the region and its ability to leverage aid from the Soviet Union decreased Syria's reliance on strong, stable relationships with its neighbours. Unlike during the 1950s and 1960s, when Syria aligned with Egypt to defensively balance against Israel, Syria after the 1973 war, with Egypt engaged in separate peace negotiations with Israel, had

⁵¹ Hinnebusch 2002; Seale 1988.

⁵² Ma'oz 1998.

⁵³ Seale 1987; Rabil, Robert G. *Syria, the United States, and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006); Quandt, William B. *Peace Process: American diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Interviews with Rifaat al-Asad and Abdul Halim Khaddam.

to chart its own course. Asad's poor relations with Iraq also left the state largely isolated in the Levant. As a result of Jordan's own structural problems and its alignment with the United States, Jordan could never have been a stable ally of Syria.⁵⁴

Syria, however, did not completely turn away from regional alliances. Saudi Arabia recognized that relations with Hafiz al-Asad were important. From 1952, after a number of military coups in Egypt and the Levant, Saudi Arabia became exposed to a number of countries to the north that were not friendly to it. In order to maintain a balance against Iraq on the one hand and Jordan on the other hand, the kingdom needed to be closer to Syria. Saudi Arabia and Syria became close, and this relationship prevented the north from becoming hostile to the kingdom's interests. The Al Saud family considered Hafiz al-Asad a man they could trust.

Importantly, it also checked and weakened the power of Egypt, and in particular Egypt's role in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Saudi Arabia's relationship with a frontline state in the Arab–Israeli conflict added legitimacy to the kingdom's position in the Arab world. In addition, Riyadh considered Damascus important in preventing Lebanon from becoming hostile to its interests and in ensuring the stability of the Levant. Damascus recognized Saudi Arabia's importance as a regional leader, but also as a key source of economic aid.⁵⁵

Beginning in the 1970s, Syria largely relied on its manipulation of the bipolar condition of the international system to achieve its aims without the need to rely on regional alliances, as it had in the past. In the construction of alliances, Asad pursued relations driven by mutual interests in the pursuit of his larger foreign policy goals that were shaped by Syria's interests and identity.

2.3. Managing Syria's Security Dilemma

2.3.1. Power and Peace Broker: Opportunities and Challenges

Syria's role as a power and peace broker in the Middle East is fundamental to its primary national interest: ensuring its domestic and international security. Located at the centre of a

⁵⁴ Ma'oz 1998; Interview with Rifaat al-Asad.

⁵⁵ Sunayama, Sonoko. *Syria and Saudi Arabia: Collaboration and Conflicts in the Oil Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

highly penetrated, conflicted, and changing region, Syria has primarily sought to ensure its own security and limit its own vulnerability.⁵⁶

Hafiz al-Asad attempted to use Syria's position to maintain stability and security in the region, which directly ensured Damascus' own position. In Asad's view, Syria could never abdicate this responsibility. If Syria avoided this responsibility, it could face its own complete isolation and a precarious security environment that could cost Syria its survival, or at the very least its sovereignty. As a state that had envisioned itself since the 1920s as a leader of Arab nationalism, Asad viewed Syria as having special responsibilities which it could not turn its back on, and he felt Syria's leadership position could only be maintained if it took an active role in the region.⁵⁷

Asad had both advantages and disadvantages in shaping Syria's regional and international environment. His advantages rested primarily in Syria's structural power and its soft power. With the consolidation of the Syrian state under Asad, Syria had the material power to ensure its own domestic security, and also to confront the security challenges of its immediate regional environment: the perpetual instability of Lebanon, and its primary enemy, Israel. Asad also proved to be strategically flexible in responding to the challenges facing the state, and this enabled the state to weather changes in its regional environment.⁵⁸

Syria's soft power rested on its central role in Arab nationalist causes and its natural leadership in championing the independence of the Arab world and in securing the rights of the Palestinians. As a result, the Asad regime benefited from domestic and regional legitimacy both in terms of receiving aid and in influencing the region's affairs through the regime's discourse. Under the leadership of Hafiz al-Asad, Syria's soft power reinforced its material power.⁵⁹

Syria's disadvantages lie in its vulnerability to the regional environment. Syria's position as Israel's northern neighbour has guaranteed it a central and permanent place in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Unlike other states, such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq, which have a degree of geographical distance, Syria could never isolate itself from the struggle against Israel. The

⁵⁶ Leverett 2005; Lesch 2005; Hinnebusch, Raymond. *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁵⁷ Hinnebusch, Raymond. "Does Syria Want Peace? Syrian Policy in the Syrian–Israeli Peace Negotiations," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26:1 (Autumn 1996), pp. 42–58; Eisenstadt, Michael. "Arming for Peace? Syria's Elusive Quest for Strategic Parity," (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Paper 31, 1993); Interviews with Rifaat al-Asad and Abdul Halim Khaddam.

⁵⁸ Hinnebusch 2002; Leverett 2005.

⁵⁹ Ma'oz 1998.

War for Independence in 1948, the Six-Day War of 1967, and the October War of 1973 all inevitably required Syria's participation.

For Hafiz al-Asad, the struggle against Israel was a deeply personal struggle interlinked with his Arab nationalist identity. Moshe Ma'oz, a political biographer of Asad, notes:

Interwoven with Arab unity is the struggle against Israel, which is, for Asad a zero-sum struggle, a matter of life or death, of being or not being a true Arab. It is not merely a territorial struggle to liberate the occupied Arab lands, notably Palestine, and it is not only a Syrian or Egyptian or Jordanian issue. It is an all-Arab war against an enemy which is portrayed as aggressive and as aiming to occupy the Arab East 'from the Nile to the Euphrates'. The Arab-Israeli conflict is seen as a fatal strategic confrontation against a country which is supported by international Zionism and imperialism, promoted notably by the United States, and which serves to destroy Arab homeland and culture by pushing the Arab people into a state of backwardness.⁶⁰

Styling himself as a leader of the Arab world, Asad made a number of public speeches fiercely condemning Israel, referring to Zionism being inseparable from Nazism and the Crusades: "Israel has been seen by the world as a racist, fascist state . . . Israel threatens the values and principles that the human being believes in . . . [and] the interests of the nations of the world."⁶¹ However, when interviewed in 1975 by the BBC, he noted the influence of both identity and interests in his thinking towards Israel:

This is a very complex question. . . . I will admit that there is a mood in the Arab world to make some sort of settlement with Israel to allow Israel to exist within certain frontiers. There is a great struggle taking place between the heart and the mind. In our hearts, we say, 'No Israel — not on any terms.' In our minds, we say, 'We must turn to other things so let us give Israel a chance to withdraw to its original frontier, let us give it a chance to prove that it will no longer try to expand.' If Israel withdraws to its original borders, we will not wage a war against it. We will accept the United Nations resolutions of 1947 in the interest of getting on with other important business, and simply let nature take its course. . . . We will work [then] behind the scenes to overthrow the Zionist system in Israel and bring about a just return of Arab presence there so as to make this land an integral part of the Arab world. . . . We don't know how exactly this will come about.⁶²

Asad also considered Syria the leader of the Palestinian cause. Lebanese Druze leader Kamal Joumlatt recalls:

President Asad clearly emphasized in the ears of Arafat . . . when he told him, 'You do not represent the Palestinians more than we do. There is neither a Palestinian people,

⁶⁰ Mo'az, 1998, p. 45.

⁶¹ From an interview with an Indian journalist, Jaysh Al-Sha'b (Syria), 20 January 1976; and from Asad's address at Damascus University, Damascus Radio, 8 March 1975; cf. Asad's address, Al-Thawra (Syria), 16 November 1975.

⁶² Asad's interview with BBC television, Damascus Radio, 8 September 1975.

nor a Palestinian entity, there is only Syria, and you are an inseparable part of the Syrian people and Palestine is an inseparable part of Syria.⁶³

Syria emerged in the 1970s under Hafiz al-Asad's leadership as a state emboldened by its newfound stability and strength, but limited by the realities of the regional environment. Asad's authoritarian leadership leveraged the mainsprings of Syria's ascendancy: its identity, its newfound stability and increased strength at home, and its construction of alliances to bolster Syria's position in the region. Importantly, Syria's emergence in the region during the 1970s changed the politics of the Levant and introduced new dynamics to the Arab–Israeli conflict, and to the status of Lebanon.

Despite the long history of tensions between the United States and Syria, Hafiz al-Asad would come to see engaging Washington as an important avenue to addressing his state's security dilemma after the October War of 1973. As a super power and Israel's principle ally, Asad recognized the important role the US could play in brokering a disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel. Washington could also help ensure that Syria's mediatory role and then, intervention in Lebanon wouldn't trigger an Israeli intervention in Lebanon. For Asad, then, engaging the United States represented a both an opportunity and a risk in 1973. Security cooperation could lead to a more secure position for Syria in the region or it could produce no substantive results.

⁶³ Joumlatt, Kamal. *This is My Legacy*, in Arabic (Paris: 1978), p. 105; Joumlatt, Kamal *I Speak for Lebanon*, transcr. Philippe Lapousterle, trans. Michael Pallis (London: Zed Press, 1982), p. 78.

CHAPTER 3

SYRIA AS A CHALLENGE FOR AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

A MISSING SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Studies of American foreign policy and the Middle East have often been prone to exceptionalism, exaggeration, and simplification.¹ Few regions engage as many audiences in American public life as the Middle East. Through images, literature, and religion, the Middle East has captured the imagination of the American public, and America's long post-war engagement has sustained this focus.²

The Middle East has perennially been a paradox for American foreign policy. Although the region is important to America's economic and strategic interests and frequently comes up in public discourse, it has never been the predominant context of American foreign policy. While events in the Middle East may attract the attention of the American public and long-standing issues often dominate domestic debates, rarely has any American president pursued a foreign policy that is not shaped in how the US views its larger role in the world and how the Middle East fits into the pursuit of wider American interests. Too often, a president is confronted by challenges and crises from all around the world, and thus the president must balance and prioritize competing issues in his structuring of America's foreign policy.³ US foreign policy towards the region thus cannot be studied or viewed in a vacuum.

Inherent in the construction of America's foreign policy are both interests and identity. A president's engagement with identity has been important in shaping and defining America's pursuit of its interests as a superpower after the Second World War. Inversely, the

¹ See, for example: Oren, Michael B. *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Scheuer, Michael. *Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam After Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2009); Baer, Robert. *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Broadway, 2009); Dershowitz, Alan M. *The Case Against Israel's Enemies: Exposing Jimmy Carter and Others Who Stand in the Way of Peace* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008).

² McAlister, Melani. *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2005).

³ Lesch, David W. *The Middle East and the United States: A Historical and Political Reassessment*, 4th edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007B); Lenczowski, George. *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

transformation of America's structural position at the end of the Second World War shifted America's identity from a predominantly inward-looking and regional project to a global enterprise.⁴

Strategic and ideational competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War ensured no American president could ever escape his country's identity.⁵

Since then, every president has been confronted by the question of how a particular course of action in international politics aligns with America's identity. However, identity alone has never been the sole determinant of American foreign policy, and each president has had to strike a careful balance between identity and interests when weighing the realities and costs of major foreign policy decisions.⁶

Presidential leadership thus features at the heart of American foreign policy.⁷

Constitutionally, foreign policy is placed in the office of the executive. It is the one area of a president's formal power where he has the most autonomy to make decisions, particularly during crisis.⁸ Successive administrations have placed different emphasis on tactics and rhetoric and have pursued actions that diverged from their predecessors, but there has been more continuity than change among Republican and Democratic leaders' policies.⁹

America's structural position — the bedrock of its interests — has created a largely bipartisan consensus in Washington on the wider contours of America's foreign policy and

⁴ Mead, Walter Russell. *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Beinart, Peter. *The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris* (New York: Harper, 2010); Ambrose, Stephen E. and Douglas G. Brinkley. *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy since 1938* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).

⁵ Engerman, David C. "Ideology and the origins of the Cold War, 1917–1962." In Odd Arne Westad and Melvyn P. Leffler, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁶ Nau, Henry R. *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Leffler, Melvyn P. "9/11 and the Past and Future of American Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 79:5 (2003), pp. 1045–1063; Leffler. "September 11 in Retrospect: George W. Bush's Grand Strategy Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs* 90:5 (September/October 2011); Drezner, Daniel W. "Values, Interests, and American Grand Strategy," *Diplomatic History* 29 (2003), pp. 429–432; Goldstein, Judith and Robert O. Keohane, eds. *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁷ Perlmutter, Amos. "The Presidential Political Center and Foreign Policy: A Critique of the Revisionist and Bureaucratic-Political Orientations," *World Politics* 27 (1974), pp. 87–106; Rodman, Peter W. *Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

⁸ Tower, John G. "Congress versus the President: The Formulation and Implementation of American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 60:2 (Winter 1981), pp. 229–246; Art, Robert J. "Bureaucratic politics and American foreign policy: A critique," *Policy Sciences* 4:4 (1973), pp. 467–490.

⁹ Wittkopf, Eugene R. and James M. McCormick. "The Cold War Consensus: Did It Exist?" *Polity* 22:4 (Summer 1990), pp. 627–653; Melanson, Richard A. *American Foreign Policy Since The Vietnam War: The Search For Consensus From Richard Nixon To George W. Bush* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005).

the US's global role in the post-war period. Presidents have had to consider their policies and actions within the context of the US's post-Second World War strategic environment. This strategic environment has limited the effects of an individual president's style, vision, and partisan orientation on the formulation of American foreign policy, but the decisions made by individual presidents have been crucial to both the successes and the failures of American foreign policy.¹⁰

Domestic politics complicate America's position further, and it strengthens the role of both identity and interests in American foreign policy. Entering office, a president must balance foreign policy priorities with a domestic policy agenda. While foreign policy decision-making is increasingly centralized in the White House, the president must confront a wide range of foreign policy actors in Washington, from Congress to the media to domestic interest groups that have various interests and their own interpretations of America's identity. American presidents must weigh their foreign policy goals in relation to how these policies will be received in Washington.¹¹

Crucially, a president faces the continuous electoral cycle of American politics, and thus must constantly weigh the expenditure of political capital on foreign policy goals with the awareness of his or her own political future and domestic agenda. The resolution of intractable foreign policy problems has a short life span in a president's foreign policy due to the high demands of the office and the limited political capital a president can expend on foreign policy. No president has the energy to fully devote his or her attention to American

¹⁰ Gaddis, John Lewis *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Dueck, Colin. "New Perspectives on American Grand Strategy," *International Security* 28:4 (Spring 2004), pp. 197–216; Art, Robert J. "A Defensible Defense: America's Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security* 15:4 (Spring, 1991), pp. 5–53; Mastanduno, Michael. "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security* 21:4 (Spring 1997), pp. 49–88; Layne, Christopher. "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22:1 (Summer, 1997), pp. 86–124.

¹¹ Lindsay, James M. "Deference and Defiance: The Shifting Rhythms of Executive-Legislative Relations in Foreign Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33 (2003), pp. 530–546; Wood, B. Dan and Jeffrey S. Peake. "The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Agenda Setting," *American Political Science Review* 92:1 (March 1998), pp. 173–184; Quaile Hill, Kim. "The Policy Agendas of the President and the Mass Public: A Research Validation and Extension," *American Journal of Political Science* 42:4 (October 1998), pp. 1328–1334; Clapp, Priscilla and Mortom Halperin. *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 2nd edition (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2006); Christison, Kathleen. *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Little, Douglas. *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945*, 3rd edition (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

foreign policy, particularly when confronted with an extensive domestic agenda or major crisis. Decisions are therefore weighed and made within the context of domestic politics.¹²

Successive presidents are also confronted by the limits of America's own structural power. Events often are beyond the control of the United States, and the outcomes are not always in line with America's wider goals. A superpower has always been limited by the reality that power beyond hard power must often be exercised through persuasion, or convincing another state to follow the superpower's leadership, and that hard power in the form of economic and military incentives has limited purchasing power.¹³ Smaller states in regions of concern can thus manipulate a superpower in the pursuit of their own goals.¹⁴ For example, economic resources can limit the ability of the United States to invest fully in pursuing particular foreign policy priorities in light of more pressing domestic issues, and, as a result, American politicians must weigh which policies to pursue.¹⁵ As Walter Lippman famously observed, "Foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power."¹⁶ This observation has weighed on every American president's mind.

America's relations with the Middle East thus reflect the wider strategic context in which a president acts. It is important to remember that the Middle East has never been able to change America's overall strategic goals. Every American president must then shape a foreign policy towards the Middle East within these constraints, and also confront the limits of his or her ability to effect change in the region, as well as the unpredictability of events.¹⁷

More so than other regions, the high concentration of violent political events in the Middle East often unexpectedly forces presidents to devote considerable focus on a region that they are often unprepared to deal with and that is not always high on their list of priorities. In addition, few American presidents have had the acumen and experience to fully grasp the

¹² Ibid; Quandt, William B. "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 101:5 (1986), pp. 825–837.

¹³ Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Mead, Walter Russell. *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk* (New York: Vintage, 2005).

¹⁴ Gerges, Fawaz A. *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955-1967* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994); Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Mandelbaum, Michael. *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010).

¹⁶ Huntington, Samuel P. "Coping with the Lippman Gap," *Foreign Affairs* 66:3 (1987/1988), pp. 453–477.

¹⁷ Baxter, Kylie and Sharama Akbarzadeh. *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Roots of Anti-Americanism*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2008).

issues and challenges facing the region, and thus are more likely to frame their responses within a global context than a local context.¹⁸

The US's relationship with Syria, a relationship between a superpower and a small state, needs to be understood within this context. Syria's emergence as an important state in American foreign policy — both for a period in the 1950s and, more importantly, during the administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford in the 1970s — made the state a critical, but ultimately absent, component of the US's security architecture in the region.

Since its inception, Syria has been faced with an overriding security dilemma; Washington has been challenged by the absence of security and stability for its interests in the Middle East. The Syria challenge is important to understanding America's relationship with the Arab world and the effectiveness of its foreign policy in the region.

This chapter examines first the development of America's wider foreign policy in the Middle East. It then examines the emergence of Syria as a factor in American policy in the region from the 1950s. Finally, the chapter examines the constraints and opportunities America faced in co-opting Syria into its regional security architecture until 1967, and the role identity and interests played in shaping America's response to Syria during this early period of the Cold War. In addressing these three aspects of the US–Syrian relationship, the chapter also provides a review of the relevant literature on America's engagement with Syria prior to the inauguration of President Richard Nixon.

3.1. A Benevolent Beginning

The United States first encountered the Middle East in a relatively benign manner. Through cultural, religious, and educational exchanges beginning in the nineteenth century, the emerging power distinguished itself from European states that sought conquest and treasure in the region. Christian missionaries brought to the Levant an image of the United States as a democratic, multicultural, and benevolent power which sought to understand the region in its own context.¹⁹

President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, including his embrace of self-determination, at the 1919 Versailles Conference at the end of the First World War furthered this

¹⁸ Lenczowski, George. *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Tibawi, A.L. *American Interests in Syria, 1800-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); *Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Kidd, Thomas S. *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

impression that, unlike its British and French counterparts, the US embraced the aspirations of the Arab people to create their own states.²⁰ The King–Crane Commission, which recommended a political order for the region in line with the principles of self-determination, reinforced the impression that America sought to turn a page on the old international politics of the region.²¹

However, the Arab world underestimated the balance of power in the international system at the end of the First World War. While the United States debuted as a great power in the First World War, Europe, notably Britain and France, still largely ruled the world. The US, particularly the Republican leadership in Congress, showed little interest in expanding into areas of the world still governed by Britain and France. Europe shaped the region more than the United States in the interwar years, and it laid the foundation of the modern state system in the Middle East. The neo-colonial moment triumphed in the Middle East.²²

Despite the disappointment in the Arab world over the failure of self-determination, the United States, as a result of the activities of Christian missionaries, remained in the region and a positive view of the state was cultivated. As Ussama Makdisi notes, America's benevolent image as an anti-colonial power and its appealing soft power ensured that while it did not exercise political influence in the region, its image remained positive during the inter-war years.²³

3.2. America Engages Syria: From the End of the Second World War to the Dawn of the Cold War

Unlike states such as Egypt or Israel, Syria never received the pivotal focus of American foreign policy in the Middle East. In the eyes of policymakers in Washington, Syria — structurally and economically weak from its inception — lacked the stability and material strength to become an anchor for American interests in the region. It was seen as a

²⁰ Manela, Erez. *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); MacMillan, Margaret. *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003).

²¹ Howard, Harry N. *The King–Crane Commission: An American Inquiry in the Middle East* (Beirut: Khayyat's, 1963).

²² Fromkin, David. *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1989); DeNovo, John A. *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900–1939* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1963); Zeine, Zeine N. *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Western Diplomacy and the Rise and Fall of King Faisal's Kingdom in Syria* (Beirut: Khayyat's, 1960).

²³ Makdisi, Ussama. *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U.S.–Arab Relations: 1820–2001* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010); Grabill, Joseph L. *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East: Missionary Influence on American Policy, 1810–1927* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971).

vulnerable state more susceptible to instability and foreign intrusion than one with the capacity to be a strong regional power.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt briefly engaged Syria in the early years of the Second World War. In 1941, the British and the Free French intervened in the Levant to liberate Syria and Lebanon from Vichy French occupation. Subsequently, Charles De Gaulle promised the Syrian political elite that France would grant Syria full independence and end the mandate. Roosevelt welcomed this development and saw it as aligning with the principles outlined in the Atlantic Charter, which Roosevelt considered the framework for a post-war international system led by the Allied powers. The American president also appreciated the Syrian political elites' opposition to Nazi Germany. However, by November 1941, Washington had been informed that France planned to maintain its mandatory rule over Syria. Facing opposition from the United States and Britain over this change in position, France offered to grant Syria formal independence, but on the condition that France retain its influence in the state.²⁴

Paris' demands were welcomed neither by Washington nor by Syria's political elites. Facing mounting opposition in Syria and Lebanon, France declared marshal law in November 1943 after Syrian parliamentary elections resulted in the election of nationalist parties into government who opposed the proposed French treaty. French forces subsequently violently suppressed opposition to their mandatory rule, and Paris went so far as to invalidate the Parliamentary elections. France's violent actions deepened antipathy to French rule in the Levant and heightened objections by the United States and Great Britain.²⁵

Roosevelt wrote to the president of Syria, Shukri al-Quwatli, to express his support: "I can assure you that the Government of the United States and the American people are following with sympathy and attention the progress of the Syrian republic and the welcome the establishment of the new government which you head."²⁶ Roosevelt was deeply concerned that the Atlantic Charter would be seen as having no legitimacy if the US did not object to the French action. Rebuffing the United States, Paris continued pushing for the treaty. By the autumn of 1944, Roosevelt warned France that the US would not recognize the treaty and informed France that their mandatory rule was not recognized during a time of war. The US formally recognized Syria and Lebanon as sovereign states in September 1944.

²⁴ O'Sullivan 2012, Ch. 7; Moubayad, Sami. *Syria and the USA: Washington's relations with Damascus from Wilson to Eisenhower* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), Ch. 4–6.

²⁵ O'Sullivan 2012; Ch. 7.

²⁶ US Government. "FDR to Kouatlati, November 12, 1943." In *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1943, Vol. IV, The Near East and Africa* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1964), p. 1038.

Roosevelt also assisted in securing Syria's entry to the UN conference in 1945. Paris, however, did not accept this recognition by the United States, and was determined to press ahead with the treaty.²⁷

Unable to contain the large protests in Damascus and Aleppo, in May 1945 France launched an aerial bombing campaign and a land campaign against Syrian government positions. In response, Prime Minister Churchill of Great Britain threatened to intervene if France did not cease the campaign, withdraw its forces, and recognize Syria's independence. President Truman supported Churchill's plans to intervene in Damascus. In the face of this possible military intervention, France agreed to Britain's conditions, and withdrew all of its troops by the 14th of April 1946.²⁸

As Sami Moubayed notes, Roosevelt's and Truman's actions in securing Syria's independence from France were initially welcomed by the Syrian political elite as a sign that the United States was different from their former colonial ruler, France, and a state that Syria could have amicable relations with. However, the exigencies of the United States' Cold War position changed these circumstances.²⁹

In 1949, Harry Truman signed off on CIA backing of a coup to overthrow the first post-independence government of Shukri al-Quwatli to install General Husni al-Za'im — a pro-western and Iraqi-leaning dictator — who supported an American-sponsored oil pipeline through Syria and was amenable to improving relations with Israel. General Za'im only lasted four and half months in office before he was overthrown by a military coup.³⁰

The instability of domestic politics in Syria and the various political factions in the military proved toxic for the US. Attempts by the American embassy staff in Damascus to build relations with the governments proved largely futile due to the volatile nature of Syrian politics. Truman found that as soon as he began to gain traction on an economic and military agreement with Damascus, the government was overthrown by a military coup.

Harry Truman's recognition and support of the creation of the state of Israel in spite of the opposition of his own State Department deeply weakened the US's image in Syria. It also made it very difficult for the political elite in Syria, due to its volatile domestic environment, to have a stable relationship with the US as long as the Washington offered political support to the state of Israel. Thus, differences over Israel and the domestic instability of the state

²⁷ O'Sullivan 2012, Ch. 7.

²⁸ Moubayad 2012, Ch. 5.

²⁹ Moubayed 2012, pp. 56–57.

³⁰ Moubayed 2012, Ch. 6.

made Syria a threat to America's interests that needed to be contained, instead of a state Washington could cooperate with.³¹

3.3. Syria and the Eisenhower Doctrine

The challenge of Syria to American foreign policy became particularly apparent during the Eisenhower Administration, with the US's assumption from the British of a leading responsibility in the region. Witnessing the failure of Britain after Suez and Nasser's assertiveness and links with the Soviet Union by 1957, Eisenhower invested heavily in containing Egypt's emergence with his own strategic doctrine: the Eisenhower doctrine.³²

Unveiled in a speech to Congress on the 5th of January 1957, the president offered assistance both militarily and economically to any state threatened by communism.³³ As John Lewis Gaddis notes, both Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, viewed the contest with the Soviet Union in deeply moral terms.³⁴ At the Caracas Conference in April 1957, Dulles warned, "International communism is on the prowl to capture those nations whose leaders feel that newly acquired sovereign rights have to be displayed by flouting other independent nations. That kind of sovereignty is suicidal sovereignty."³⁵

Interlinking communism with nationalism, in 1953 Eisenhower wrote:

Nationalism is on the march and world Communism is taking advantage of that spirit of nationalism to cause dissension in the free world. Moscow leads many misguided people to believe that they can count on Communist help to achieve and sustain nationalistic ambitions. Actually what is going on is that the Communists are hoping to take advantage of the confusion resulting from destruction of existing relationships and in the difficulties and uncertainties of disrupted trade, security and understandings, to further aims of world revolution and the Kremlin's domination of all people.³⁶

Ernest May observes, "Before mid-1950, containment seemed to involve primarily an effort to create economic, social, and political conditions assumed to be inhospitable to communism, whereas from the mid-1950s onward, the policy seemed primarily one of preserving military frontiers behind which conditions unsuited to subversion could gradually evolve."³⁷ A study by Eisenhower's National Security Council in 1952 concluded, "The problem of leadership is crucial. We should make full use of our military and economic

³¹ Lesch 1992, pp. 21–24.

³² Lesch 1992, Ch. 6–7; Moubayed 2012, Ch. 7–13.

³³ Devine, Robert A. *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

³⁴ Gaddis 2005, Ch. 5.

³⁵ Bulletin. 1957, April 22. Department of State. *Bulletin*, XXXVI (May 6, 1957), p. 719.

³⁶ Diary. 1953, January 6. Dwight D. Eisenhower Diary Series. Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, KS (Eisenhower Library), Ann Whitman File Box 5.

³⁷ In Nye, Joseph S., Jr., ed. *The Making of America's Soviet Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 221.

programs to support, or develop, leaders whose maintenance in, or advent to, power gives such promise.”³⁸

Applying his new strategic doctrine, Eisenhower deepened the support of the pro-western regional alliance formed in 1955 — the Baghdad Pact — that brought Iran, Turkey, and Iraq together. Relying as well on the conservative states in the region, allies against the Soviet Union and Arab nationalism, the US built close ties with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey. Eisenhower hoped these alliances would effectively counter-check Egypt and Syria, which were gaining closer links with the Soviet Union. Initially, Eisenhower even hoped he could persuade Syria to join the Baghdad Pact.³⁹

However, both Truman and Eisenhower deeply under-estimated the damaging effect of the Arab–Israeli conflict on their wider Cold War strategy. As David Lesch observes, “Such things as the Baghdad Pact, the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Suez War, the perceived threat from Israel, and the interminable covert efforts to maintain in power or put out of power pro-West elements, presented to most people in the Middle East a threat more real and dangerous than anything emanating from communism or the Soviet bloc.”⁴⁰

Despite Eisenhower taking a more even-handed approach to the Arab–Israeli conflict, both administrations believed that arming states that were in conflict with Israel was contrary to creating conditions for a peace agreement with Israel and potentially detrimental to their own domestic political position. Therefore, they refrained from providing full military assistance to Syria as long as Damascus and Tel Aviv were in conflict. This left the Syrian military — even the more pro-western factions who originally were open to military agreements with the United States — to seek assistance from the Soviet Union, which did not attach the same conditions as the US did. As David Lesch and Salim Yaqub note, the fundamental unravelling of the Eisenhower Doctrine in the Middle East was due to America’s policy towards Israel.⁴¹

While the US put an overwhelming emphasis on their global concerns in relation to the Middle East, Washington failed to recognize the effects of the legacy of colonialism and the creation of Israel on the Arab world, and also failed to engage the region on its own terms.

³⁸ Study. NSC Staff Study, 1952, January 18. “The Position of the United States with Respect to the Area Comprising the Arab States, Iran, and Israel,” NSC 129/annex, National Archives.

³⁹ Lesch 1992; Moubayad 2012, Ch 7–13; Yaqub, Salim. *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁴⁰ Lesch 1992, p. 13.

⁴¹ Lesch 1992; Yaqub 2004, Ch. 7-13.

Arab nationalism resonated with the Arab world precisely because it offered an answer to the problems most acutely associated with the region; in stark contrast, the Baghdad Pact offered no such solutions.⁴²

By 1957, Syria was a state that represented the prevailing mood in the region. Its population largely supported and identified with Arab nationalism in the way it was envisioned by Nasser on Radio Cairo: no western interference in the Arab world after Suez, opposition to Israel, and openness to alternative models of economic development. Parliamentary elections in Syria in 1955 brought the first communist deputy in the Arab world to power; a Syrian–Egyptian defence pact was signed on the 20th of October 1955. Also in 1955, a Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union was signed in March with the support of the Communist Party and the Ba’th Party, resulting in the first arms shipment from Czechoslovakia in 1956. This crucial agreement came more out of the recognition that the Soviet Union’s interests aligned more with those of Syria than of the United States, and less of the state’s own identification with the Soviet Union.⁴³

Even though Syria consistently viewed itself as largely neutral when it came to the Cold War rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union throughout this period, these actions alarmed Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, who feared that Syria would become a Soviet satellite. On the 9th of November 1956, CIA Director Allen Dulles warned:

Syria is in a critical condition where a Communist Coup might be pulled off particularly if Moscow was able to infiltrate hard core Soviet organizers plus a nucleus of a military force. . . . An overthrow of the Syrian government, and even possibly further Soviet pressures on the present government, could result in a Syrian invitation to Moscow to send troops into Syria ostensibly to protect Syria from Israel. This would lead to Syria becoming a Soviet base of operations in the area in support of Egypt. Syria thus presents a second vacuum into which the Soviet might move even more openly than in the case of Egypt and where there would be no UN force to cover the situation.⁴⁴

Dulles responded to the situation by looking at options for subverting the government where the US would back Syria’s more pro-western President Quwatli and his army chief of staff, Nizam al-Din, in allocating the more pro-left senior officers to less senior positions in the Syrian army. In mid-March 1957, Quwatli attempted to make these re-assignments, but less

⁴² Yaqub 2004.

⁴³ Lesch 1992, Ch. 5–7; Moubayad 2012, Ch. 7–13.

⁴⁴ Memorandum. 1956, November 10. From Allen Dulles to the Acting Secretary of State. Library of Congress, Microform Reading Room, on microfiche.

than a few weeks later, with stiff resistance, the president was forced to relent.⁴⁵ In response to this failure, Allen Dulles remarked, “No one there has guts or courage.”⁴⁶

3.4. The 1957 Crisis: America Confronts Syria

By the summer of 1957, the Eisenhower Administration had reached its breaking point with the government in Damascus. In mid-May 1957, the American ambassador to Syria, James S. Moose, wrote to Washington concluding that Syria was lost to the United States.⁴⁷ Allen Dulles did not share this opinion, and pressed to “start new planning” when it came to Syria.⁴⁸ In August 1957, the Syrian government signed further economic cooperation and development agreements with Moscow. Alarmed by the prospects of Syria falling into the orbit of the Soviet Union and Nasser’s Egypt, and the potential effect this might have had on the US’s position in the Arab world, President Eisenhower and Allen Dulles were not ready to concede defeat without taking more direct action.⁴⁹

Planning began in mid-July at the American embassy in Damascus to sponsor a coup to overthrow the government in Syria. Under the direction of Howard E. Stone, who was head of the CIA section at the embassy, CIA operatives began recruiting officers in the Syrian military to lead an army putsch, with the goal of cleansing the army of pro-left Ba’thist and Communist officers and installing instead Brig. Gen. Adib al-Shishakli, Syria’s exiled former president, into office. But the CIA operatives were unaware that the Syrian officers who had been approached by the CIA had informed the government of this plot. Instead of immediately acting on it, the Syrian government allowed the American plot to continue to the final hours. With US assistance, at the beginning of August General Shishakli clandestinely entered Syria and met with the coup plotters to finalize the details.⁵⁰ Before the operation could get under way, however, the Syrian regime rounded up the plotters and announced on the Syrian Broadcasting Station that the regime had foiled “a mean imperialist

⁴⁵ Yaqub 2004, pp. 150-153.

⁴⁶ Telephone Conversation. 1957, April 17. J.F. Dulles and Allen Dulles. Eisenhower Library, Dulles Papers, Telephone Calls Series, Box 6, Memoranda Tel. Conv.- General March 1957 to April 30, 1957 (2).

⁴⁷ Telephone Conversation. 1957, May 17. National Archives, U.S. Embassy, Damascus to Department of State, tel # 2779, 17 May 1957, RG 59, 783.00/5-1757.

⁴⁸ Telephone Conversation. 1957, May 7. J.F. Dulles and Allen Dulles. Eisenhower Library, Dulles Papers, Telephone Calls Series, Box 6, Memoranda Tel. Conv.- General May 7, 1957 to June 27, 1957 (4).

⁴⁹ Yaqub 2004, p. 154.

⁵⁰ Yaqub 2004, pp. 155-157.

plot.”⁵¹ The Syrian government moved quickly to expel those at the embassy associated with the plan.⁵²

Frustrated by this failure, on the 21st of August 1957 Eisenhower declared that the US would “urge that friendly Arab nations band together, and using such excuses as necessary, move to eliminate the Syrian government.”⁵³ Eisenhower and his administration feared that Damascus, further radicalized by the coup attempt, would try to destabilize Jordan and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia and Syria’s pro-western neighbours, Jordan and Iraq, which had previously tried to intervene in Syria’s affairs, initially offered private support to this initiative. However, by mid-October, the winds in the region had turned against Eisenhower. The president was confronted with a lack of regional support for taking direct action against Syria. With Nasser’s support of the Syrian government, none of these states were willing to show their public support for such action in Syria out of fear that it would spark domestic strife that would endanger their own regime’s survival.

Thus regional diplomacy to gain Arab backing bore little fruit. These states’ willingness to undermine Damascus did not go as far as Washington had hoped. Nasser’s deployment of 1,500 troops to Latakia to support Syria’s defence from possible invasion on the 13th of October 13 1957 guaranteed that none of Syria’s Arab neighbours would take part in any attempted overthrow of the Syrian regime.⁵⁴

The only remaining state that Eisenhower could rely on for a potential intervention was Turkey, which had troops stationed along the Syrian border from April in response to Syria’s support of the Arab nationalist forces in Jordan working against King Hussein in the spring of 1957. But this option had the potential of sparking a Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. In an interview with the *New York Times* on the 7th of October, Khrushchev stressed to Washington, “If war breaks out, we are near Turkey and you are not. When the guns begin to fire, the rockets can begin flying and then it will be too late to think about it.”⁵⁵ Turkish prime minister Adnan Menderes largely dismissed the Soviet threat as rhetoric, but the Eisenhower Administration took it much more seriously.⁵⁶ On the 14th of October, Christian A. Herter, the US under secretary of state, concluded with support from, among others, Allan Dulles, that “action on the part of Turkey alone,

⁵¹ *Foreign Broadcasting Information Service*, 1957, August 13. #156.

⁵² Yaqub 2004, p. 158.

⁵³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1957, August 21. Eisenhower, J.F. Dulles, et al. AWF, Eisenhower Library, International Series, box 48, Syria (3).

⁵⁴ Yaqub 2004, pp. 159–170.

⁵⁵ Newspaper Article. 1957, October 10. *New York Times*.

⁵⁶ Yaqub 2004, pp. 169–177.

particularly if overt and convincing aggression on the part of Syria cannot be shown, would lead us into an extremely serious situation.”⁵⁷

With the stakes of the Syrian problem becoming too high, the Eisenhower Administration sought a way to de-escalate the situation and, at the same time, retain its public standing amongst its allies in the Middle East and not give the impression of conceding to the Soviet Union. John Foster Dulles even worried that such action by Turkey could backfire and lead to, as he notes, “[an] Arab world united and strongly backed by the Soviet Union against all manifestations of Westernism.”⁵⁸ Dulles succeeded in calming the tensions between Turkey and Syria both through pressure on Menderes’ government to avoid conflict and through King Saud facilitating negotiations between the two states. By mid-November, all troops along Syria’s border had been withdrawn.⁵⁹

Even though this crisis had been averted, by the autumn of 1957 Eisenhower had largely failed to change the regime in Syria, and by the 22nd of February 1958, in the largest blow to the Eisenhower Doctrine, Syria and Egypt united to form the United Arab Republic. The Eisenhower Doctrine’s principle foe, Nasser, succeeded in deeply undercutting the pro-western Baghdad Pact’s position in the Arab world. Less than six months later, the pro-western Hashemite monarch in Iraq fell to an Arab nationalist military coup.⁶⁰

Crisis emerged in Lebanon as well. Keeping the promise made in his 1957 address to Congress, in the first American military intervention in the Arab world, Eisenhower deployed US marines in Lebanon in the summer of 1958 in “Operation Blue Bat.” His goal was to support the pro-western president in Beirut, Camille Chamoun, who was facing mounting Arab nationalist opposition to his rule. The first sparks of a regional Cold War of its own — the Arab Cold War, as Malcolm Kerr termed it — emerged where these states, relying on superpower support, sought to defensively balance against one another as they competed for influence in the region.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Memorandum. 1957, October 14. C. Herter to J.F. Dulles. Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, KS (hereafter Eisenhower Library) Dulles Papers, White House Memoranda Series, Box 5, Meetings with the President—1957 (2).

⁵⁸ Memorandum of Conversation. 1957, October 25. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957*, vol. 13 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), pp. 732.

⁵⁹ Yaqub 2004, pp. 169–177.

⁶⁰ Yaqub 2004, Ch. 6.

⁶¹ Yaqub 2004; Kerr, Malcolm H. *The Arab Cold War: Gamel 'Abd Al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–70*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); Gendzier, Irene L. *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon and the Middle East, 1945–1958* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); Citino, Nathan. *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

As Salim Yaqub argues, in retrospect, the Eisenhower Doctrine did more to push states away from the United States than to actually contain the influence of the Soviet Union in the region. By failing to separate communism from Arab nationalism, Eisenhower put American policy squarely in opposition to the Arab public. Also, by blindly focusing on the global context of the Cold War, he failed to see the nuance of the local context. If Eisenhower had engaged the Ba’thists in Syria instead of treating them purely as allies of the Soviet Union, Eisenhower could potentially have formed a decent relationship with the regime in Damascus. But by failing to understand Syrian domestic politics, Eisenhower contributed to the radicalization of Syria’s domestic politics against the United States. In addition, his inability to recognize that the predominant concern for Arab states at the time was the status of Israel post-1948 put the United States in a disadvantaged and dangerous position in the region.⁶²

By the end of the Eisenhower Administration, Syria was positioned as a state that needed to be contained instead of engaged. In union with Egypt through 1961, Syria became completely wrapped up in the Kennedy Administration’s policies towards Egypt. From the Ba’thist coup in 1963, Syria’s highly pronounced Arab nationalist posturing, Soviet leanings, domestic instability, and its willingness to engage in armed conflict with Israel made the state a threat to the emerging security architecture the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations sought to build in the region.⁶³

3.5. The Six-Day War and the Birth of the American-Israeli Special Relationship

Throughout the period leading up to 1967, the US viewed Syria as the lesser partner to Egypt and considered Nasser’s leadership in Cairo as the primary challenge to American interests in the region. The Ba’thist coups in Syria in 1963 and 1966 also furthered the impression that Syria was a weak and radicalized state which the US should not engage, but instead should contain, along with Egypt. Avi Shlaim and David Lesch note that Syria’s support of Palestinian *fedayeen* raids against Israel from Syrian territory and disputes over water and boundaries pushed Syria closer and closer to confrontation with Israel.⁶⁴ While Kennedy initially tried to engage Nasser without much success, President Lyndon B. Johnson focused primarily on containing Nasser and his allies in the Arab world, viewing

⁶² Yaqub 2004.

⁶³ Spiegel, Steven L. *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁶⁴ Shlaim, Avi. “Israel: Poor Little Samson.” In William Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

this as a stopgap to the expansion of Soviet communism.⁶⁵ Fawaz Gerges convincingly argues that America's support of Saudi Arabia and the royalists against Egypt and the Arab nationalists in the conflict in Yemen became the central focus of the Arab Cold War in the Middle East leading up to the 1967 war.⁶⁶

While Eisenhower devoted particular attention to the Middle East, crises in other parts of the world — the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the escalation of America's military involvement in Vietnam — ensured that the Middle East was not a focus for Kennedy. Chen Jian and Fredrik Logevall argue that the focus of the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union had all but shifted to Asia by the time of the Johnson Administration, with his escalation of American involvement in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident on the 2nd of August 1964.⁶⁷

However, with the long-simmering tensions unresolved between Israel and its neighbours, the 1967 Arab–Israeli war brought the Middle East front and centre for the Johnson Administration. It both shook the region and led the Soviet Union to threaten intervene if the US did not halt Israel's advances, risking a direct confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union. In a mere six days, Israel crushed the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, and significantly expanded its territory with the seizure of the West Bank, Gaza, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. Nasser's Arab nationalist leadership of the region suffered its deathblow, and this period marked the dénouement of the Arab nationalist dominance of Arab politics. Syria emerged battered, weakened, and radicalized in a region completely transformed.⁶⁸

American policymakers viewed this war as a victory, and assumed that the declawing of Nasser would usher in a period of stability in the Middle East. In less than a week, the Soviet-backed Arab nationalist challenge in the region was destroyed and Israel's security was guaranteed.⁶⁹ As Charles Smith notes, with UN Security Council Resolution 242 passed, Johnson backed the new political map of the Middle East in theory, but in practice he committed no political capital to implementing it. As a result, Israel did not withdraw from

⁶⁵ Fain, Taylor W. *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁶⁶ Gerges, Fawaz A. "The Kennedy Administration and the Egyptian–Saudi Conflict in Yemen: Co-Opting Arab Nationalism," *Middle East Journal* 49:2 (Spring 1995), pp. 292–311.

⁶⁷ Chen Jian. *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Logevall, Fredrik. *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁶⁸ Segev, Tom. *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005); Oren, Michael B. *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Presidio Press, 2002).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

the land it conquered during the war, and Israel's neighbours refused to enter into peace talks with Israel.⁷⁰ The Johnson Administration underestimated the deep loss and burning irredentism that this event sparked in the Arab world.⁷¹

In response to Israel's actions during the Six-Day War, recognizing the consequence this event would have on Arab perceptions of the West, France, Israel's most reliable military partner until 1967, ended its military aid to the state. President Charles de Gaulle described the Jewish people as "self-righteous and domineering."⁷² As Jean-Pierre Filiu argues, the "French-Israeli divorce" occurred eighteen months later, when de Gaulle cut off all aid to Israel after Israeli forces used French-supplied helicopters to target the Beirut airport on the 28th of December 1968. As a consequence, Israel entered the post-1967 environment reliant largely on the US for military aid.⁷³

American policymakers underestimated how this event could transform the politics of the region. Syria's loss of the Golan Heights did not spark an inward search for a new identity or a less assertive role in the region, as one may have expected; instead, it laid the ground for a more stable and confident Syria. The rise of Hafiz al-Asad, first as defence minister and then as president, and his consolidation of the state in the early 1970s transformed Egypt's more radical junior partner into a state that the US could engage with on its own terms for the first time.

The constant turbulence of the Arab-Israeli conflict took a life of its own in American foreign policy after the 1967 war, with America assuming responsibility for Israel's security requirements. The Johnson Administration, considering Israel a beachhead against the Soviet Union in the region, responded to France's withdrawal of a significant amount of aid with an increased commitment to support Israel both militarily and financially.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Smith, Charles D. "The United States and the 1967 War." In Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷¹ Dawisha, Adeed. *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Gerges, Fawaz A. "The Transformation of Arab Politics: Disentangling Myth from Reality." In Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012B).

⁷² Press Conference. 1967, November 27. Given by Charles De Gaulle at the Elysée Palace, Paris.

⁷³ Filiu, Jean-Pierre. "France and the June 1967 War." In Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷⁴ Quandt, William B. "Lyndon Johnson and the June 1967 War: What Color Was the Light?" *The Middle East Journal* 46:2 (Spring 1992), pp. 198–228; Little, Douglas. "The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957–1968," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (November 1993), pp. 563–585.

President Johnson was also aware of how the Vietnam War was sitting with liberals in the Jewish community, who criticized the deepening US involvement in the crisis. To shore up support, Johnson approved a larger military and economic aid package to Israel than Kennedy's previous aid package. In a meeting with Israeli president Zalman Shazar in August 1966, Johnson asked for Israel's "sympathetic understanding" of the US's position in Vietnam. Johnson also relied on two close associates who had strong ties with the Jewish community and the Israeli leadership, Abraham Feinberg and Arthur Krim, for counsel on Israel. Both Feinberg and Krim served as unofficial envoys between Johnson and the Israeli leadership.⁷⁵

For both the United States and the Soviet Union, after 1967 the Arab–Israeli conflict became the predominant competition in the Arab world. With the United States backing Israel and the Soviet Union backing Egypt, Syria, and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), the regional conflict, further polarized by the 1967 war, took on larger Cold War implications for the United States, which saw Israel as a crucial ally against the Soviet Union and its allies in the Arab world.⁷⁶ Charles Smith notes that the war established a "special relationship" between the two states centred on both strategic and political interests, most notably in the form of arms agreements. These arms agreements began in the 1960s, when Kennedy approved the first sales of weapons, but expanded significantly to military hardware such as tanks and jet planes under Johnson.⁷⁷

The Soviet Union largely viewed the conflict within the context of its own strategic contestation with the United States throughout the course of its involvement in the region. However, the conflict took on a more substantial dimension for the United States.⁷⁸ Notably, American policymakers viewed Israel's survival in the context of the ideational influences on American foreign policy.⁷⁹ While Charles Smith makes the argument that strategic interests primarily drove the relationship, Smith also acknowledges Johnson's own personal sympathies to Israel.⁸⁰ Unlike de Gaulle's assessment of the Israeli people, Johnson, who

⁷⁵ Smith 2012.

⁷⁶ Lesch, David W. *The Arab–Israeli Conflict: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007A); Ginat, Rami. "The Soviet Union: the Roots of War and a Reassessment of Historiography." In Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The 1967 Arab–Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷⁷ Smith 2012.

⁷⁸ Golan, Galia. *Soviet Policies in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Dawisha, Adeed. and Karen Dawisha, *The Soviet Union in the Middle East* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1982).

⁷⁹ Mart, Michelle. *Eye on Israel: How America Came to View the Jewish State as an Ally* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Davidson, Lawrence. *American Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011).

⁸⁰ Smith 2012.

saw the US as one of their few friends in the world, described them to one of his close advisors as “a modern-day version of the Texans fighting the Mexicans.”⁸¹

Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer argue identity became a critical component of America’s relationship with Israel from the 1960s, at times outweighing its strategic importance.⁸² Israel, as the homeland for the Jewish people in the Holy Land and a place of refuge for the hundreds of thousands of Jews persecuted throughout Europe and the Soviet Union, resonated strongly within the American Jewish community and a number of Christian communities in the United States. Israel’s identity deeply reflected the common Judeo-Christian origins of both countries and its peoples. Israel’s position as a democracy fighting for its survival created a strong sense of common identity between it and the United States.⁸³

Also, as William Martin notes, the Jewish community, aligned with the Christian Right, became a powerful advocate for Israel and an important domestic constituency for any elected official to win office in the United States.⁸⁴ As well, Edward Said argues that coverage of the Arab–Israeli conflict from the perspective of Israel has become a consistent feature of many newscasts across the US, and has directly shaped and sustained an audience receptive to Israel’s actions.⁸⁵

Israel’s growing support in domestic circles in the United States gave it the confidence to assert itself more in its relationship with the US and make demands unheard of in other bilateral relationships. Cognisant of the Jewish community’s weight in the domestic politics of the United States, Israel leveraged its position to obtain aid and desired American foreign policy positions, even at the expense of the US’s strategic interests. The Arab–Israeli conflict became a force of its own in American foreign policy to the Middle East by the end of the 1960s, and this further deepened and complicated America’s engagement with the region.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Spiegel 1986, p. 123.

⁸² Walt and Mearsheimer, 2007.

⁸³ Mead, Walter Russell. “The New Israel and the Old: Why Gentile Americans Back the Jewish State,” *Foreign Affairs* 87:4 (July/August 2008), pp. 28–46

⁸⁴ Walt and Mearsheimer 2007; Martin, William. “The Christian Right and American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy* 114 (Spring 1998), pp. 66–80; McAlister, Melani. *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2005).

⁸⁵ Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

⁸⁶ Mearsheimer, John J. and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); Mearsheimer, John J. and Stephen M. Walt. “Mearsheimer and Walt Respond,” *Foreign Policy* 155 (July/August 2006[A]), pp. 64–66; Lewis, Samuel W. “The

3.6. A Temporary Victory

President Johnson left office with his fragile security architecture intact. However, by not seeking a resolution to the territorial issues between Israel and its neighbours, this security architecture was fundamentally unstable and by 1970 it had begun to show cracks that could not be covered. President Nixon took office in January 1969 and was confronted less than two years later with a crisis in Jordan.

The United States had cordial relation with Syria in the early 1940s, when President Roosevelt supported Syria's independence from France. However, with the beginning of the Cold War, the United States' priorities shifted in the region. In 1949, three years after Syria's independence in 1946, the CIA helped overthrow the elected president of Syria to ensure American commercial interests. Viewing the Syrian government as too closely aligned with the Soviet Union, President Eisenhower unsuccessfully sought to overthrow the government in Syria in 1957. America's support for Israel and its interference in Syria's domestic affairs during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations resulted in relations between these two states becoming largely non-existent, beyond maintaining formal diplomatic relations.

Kennedy and Johnson viewed Syria as the junior partner to Egypt both during and after the UAR, and did not try to substantively engage Damascus. Focused on other parts of the world, Johnson did not try to substantively resolve Israel's tensions with its neighbours. The Six-Day War in 1967 led to the abrogation of formal diplomatic relations between the United States and Syria. Ensuring Israel's security and containing its neighbours represented Washington's relations with Israel and its neighbours when Nixon entered office in 1969.

United States and Israel: Evolution of an Unwritten Alliance," *Middle East Journal* 53:3 (Summer 1999), pp. 364–378.

CHAPTER 4

BLACK SEPTEMBER, 1970

SYRIA AND THE US ENCOUNTER A CRISIS IN JORDAN

“Crisis management, the academic focus of the Sixties, was no longer enough. Crises were symptoms of deeper problems which if allowed to fester would prove increasingly unmanageable. . . . It was my conviction that a concept of our fundamental national interests would provide a ballast of restraint and assurance of continuity.”

-Henry Kissinger¹

Richard Nixon’s inauguration on the 19th of January 1969 ushered in a new direction for American foreign policy. President Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, sought to strategically re-engage American foreign policy after the tumultuous events of the 1960s and to bring a new focus to American policy as the US entered the 1970s. Importantly, Nixon and Kissinger believed that a clearer conceptualization of America’s interests and identity was needed to allow the United States to compete more effectively in the international system against the Soviet Union and rising powers in Asia.

Equally, crises — in their essence the interplay between statesmen’s strategies and the unpredictable events that confronted them — needed to be better addressed to avoid situations such as Vietnam, which had consumed Nixon’s predecessors and left the United States’ position in the international system vulnerable. Nixon and Kissinger argued that a defined strategic vision would better guide the United States forward. At the same time, a strategy of limits would allow the United States to better weigh which commitments to undertake and which ones to avoid in pursuit of their wider foreign policy objectives.

After the devastating defeat of 1967, Syria was facing an uncertain future by the beginning of the 1970. The Six–Day War exposed the weakness of the Ba’th Party’s leadership on foreign policy and deepened internal divisions within Syria’s ruling elite. The Ba’th Party leadership was divided between Salah Jadid, Nureddin al-Atassi, and Hafiz al-Asad. In the wake of 1967, Hafiz al-Asad, then the defence minister, began to see that Syria’s unstable domestic situation and weak foreign policy threatened its survival. Moving to solidify his position in the state, by September 1970 Hafiz al-Asad had consolidated control over the

¹ Kissinger, Henry A. *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 65.

army corps and the internal security forces, and had neutralized Jadid's leadership over the Syrian-backed Palestinian Saqa'a units. Jadid and Atassi retained support in the Ba'th Party, however.

The first significant crisis to face the United States and Syria in the 1970s was Jordan's Black September of 1970. Importantly, Syria's intervention in Jordan in 1970 marked the first time that the United States had come directly into conflict with Syria since the 1967 war. Both states had contrasting perceptions of the conflict. For the United States, the crisis was viewed in the context of the Cold War; for Syria, the conflict was viewed in the context of the defeat of 1967. Syria's leadership competition over the identity of the state's foreign policy added an additional layer of complexity to Syria's role in Jordan.

To better understand this crisis and how both states' foreign policies interacted with it, this chapter will first examine the re-conceptualization of American foreign policy after President Nixon took office in 1969 and how Nixon and Kissinger applied their new strategy to the case of Jordan's Black September. It will then look at the impact that Syria's domestic political in-fighting after the 1967 war had on Syrian foreign policy and on Damascus' decision to intervene in Jordan in 1970. Finally, it will look at the impact of the crisis on both states' positions in the region. This chapter illustrates the contrasting foreign policy identities within the Syrian state before Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970 and the beginning of Asad's re-orientation of Syria's foreign policy when he was still defence minister. This chapter also shows how Nixon and Kissinger's experience with the crisis helped shape their views of both Syria and the regional security environment in the Middle East.

4.1. A New Leadership in the White House

Richard Nixon was elected by a razor-thin majority in the popular vote in 1968. An outsider by many standards in Washington, he was an insider in terms of his long career as a congressman and senator, and then as vice president under Eisenhower, as well as his time campaigning both successfully and unsuccessfully for the presidency. This combination of experiences had produced a man both at home in Washington and equally apart from it.²

As his biographers note, Nixon was not disposed to the normal requirements of political office. Despite his own air of public confidence, Nixon was a deeply insecure man who

² Ambrose, Stephen. *Nixon: The Education of a Politician, 1913–1962* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Ambrose, Stephen. *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962–1972* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989); Morris, Roger. *Richard Milhous Nixon: The Rise of an American Politician* (New York: Holt, 1990).

never felt entirely comfortable on the public stage. He was as ambitious and confident as he was distrustful, jealous, and resentful. Few men looked for and were validated by so many enemies. From Congress to the media to those whom he perceived as having a better upbringing than he did, Nixon, consumed by his perceived sense of inadequacy, sought to best his rivals. Even when he did, Nixon never felt confident enough in his own position to feel secure. His body language always betrayed his lack of confidence.³

Trained as a lawyer at Duke, shaped by the ideological aspects of foreign affairs in his career as a congressman and senator, and versed in the statecraft of foreign affairs as vice president, Nixon viewed foreign policy as a prerogative of the president. He had also formed many close relationships with leaders around the world during his time as vice president, which gave him an added gravitas in foreign policy that few of his predecessors had coming into office, with the notable exception of Eisenhower.⁴ Nixon had a sharp, seasoned, and innate understanding of international affairs, and his vision, combined with the precision, nuance, and complimentary views of his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, formed the foreign policy of his administration.⁵

Unlike Eisenhower, his former running mate, who gave power both to the State Department and the CIA but left the White House in firm control of policymaking through the National Security Council, Nixon fundamentally viewed bureaucracy with suspicion, in particular the State Department, which he viewed as stocked with those who had never taken him seriously when he was vice president. Equally, he saw the CIA as being full of enemies more than friends. In his presidential transition, Nixon even asked Kissinger to exclude the CIA director from the National Security Council, a decision that Nixon eventually relented on.⁶

To address his fears of the bureaucracy, Nixon sought to revive the National Security Council (NSC) from its rather dilapidated state under Johnson and make it the central policy organ for the crafting of American foreign policy.⁷ Instead of choosing someone directly in his political circle, Nixon sought a man whom he had only met briefly at one Christmas party and who, surprisingly, had criticized him in the past and represented the pedigree and

³ Summers, Anthony. *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon* (New York: Viking, 2000); Safire, William. *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975).

⁴ Nixon, Richard M. *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978).

⁵ Interview with Richard Herman, March 2013, Palm Springs; Dallek, Robert. *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), Ch. 1, 3-4.

⁶ Kissinger 1979.

⁷ Rothkopf, David. *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

background he resented, a Harvard-trained academic who was Jewish. But Nixon was struck by Kissinger's brilliance when reading his work on nuclear weapons, and he chose Kissinger to serve as his principle foreign policy advisor.⁸ The president believed that statesmanship and foreign policy, a higher level than mere domestic politics, needed to be managed by a brilliant man, but one who was also entirely dependent on the president's faith and confidence. Unlike a secretary of state, who was beholden to his bureaucracy and to Congress, a national security advisor relied exclusively on the support of the president.⁹

Surprisingly for a man with Nixon's character, he trusted Kissinger, a man with a background very different from him, with a central and highly powerful position in his administration. Acknowledging the differences between the two of them, Nixon noted, "The combination was unlikely: the grocer's son from Whittier and the refugee from Hitler's Germany, the politician and the academic. . . . But our differences helped make the partnership work."¹⁰

4.2. Defining America's Interests: A Strategy of Limits

The year 1968 was a turbulent one for the United States, with the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the protests at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and the morale-breaking effect of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. America was deeply divided and distrustful after the loss of tens of thousands of soldiers' lives in the jungles of Vietnam, and was seeking a new direction by the time Richard Nixon was inaugurated in 1969. While the Republican Party won the White House, the Democrats controlled Congress. Additionally, Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stressed that Congress needed to play a greater role in foreign-policymaking to ensure that misadventures into states such as Vietnam and the enormous cost they had on America's fiscal and political position could be prevented. Congress was no longer willing to invest as much in these commitments as it had in the past, at least, not without being allowed much greater scrutiny.¹¹

⁸ Kissinger's work on nuclear weapons which caught Nixon's attention: Kissinger, Henry A. *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

⁹ Isaacson, Walter. *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005); Suri, Jeremy. *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009); Morris, Roger. *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

¹⁰ Nixon 1978, p. 562.

¹¹ Perlstein, Rick. *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008); Litwak, Robert S. *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Ch. 4.

Nixon and Kissinger considered America to be at a fundamental turning point.¹² The structure of the international system had been moving through the 1950s and 1960s to a more multipolar world where America's predominance in the international system was no longer assured. Economically, the US's lead position in the financial system was no longer secure following the de-linking of the gold standard due to inflation resulting from the spending associated with Vietnam. At the same time, the economic recovery of states in Western Europe, the emergence of Japan, and the rise of China led to more economic competition for the United States in the international system. Further complicating the US's situation, the Soviet Union was making successful inroads in the Third World. Vietnam, however, had sapped America's resources and standing more than any other conflict. The Vietnam War led Kissinger to conclude that while the US was not in a state of decline, its position needed to be restored. Kissinger disagreed with his critics who viewed Vietnam as a symptom of America's failure, instead seeing it as an opportunity.

This restoration of America's leadership position in the world required new thinking, and most importantly a new conceptualization of America's strategic competition with the Soviet Union, the predominant context in which Kissinger viewed the US's foreign policy. He argued that America had to redefine the pursuit of its interests in the framework of a larger, "coherent" strategic vision. As John Lewis Gaddis notes, while American policymakers had never believed that Universalism — attempting to mould the world in the US's image — was feasible given America's capabilities, American administrations instead emphasized diversity, preserving an international system that allowed the fostering of more than just one ideology. In order to preserve this diversity, the United States had to ensure "an international equilibrium." But all too often, when implementing this strategy in practice the balance of power in the international system was perceived in a way that emphasized a Universalist response to every threat that remotely challenged this balance of power. As a result, all threats were treated globally as credible threats to American interests without the wisdom of conceptualization and moderation.¹³

Kissinger observed from this experience that "conceptual coherence" had collapsed, and successive administrations had failed to view the pursuit of America's interests in the context of a larger vision. They were driven instead by short-term pragmatism and self-serving bureaucracies. Kissinger believed that the focus on the means instead of the ends

¹² Speech. 1968, August 8. Nixon's acceptance address to the Republican National Convention. Reported in the *New York Times*, August 9, 1968; Nixon, Richard M. "Asia after Viet Nam," *Foreign Affairs* 46:1 (October 1967), pp. 111–125.

¹³ Gaddis, John Lewis *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

had led to an unstable global order that had put the United States in a weakened position. Importantly, he believed that Vietnam was a symptom of this lack of philosophical engagement from America's foreign policy. Writing in 1968, Kissinger stressed, "We will never be able to contribute to building a stable and creative world order until we first form some conception of it."¹⁴

Kissinger introduced four conceptual parameters for viewing America's interests. First, he believed this balance of power in the international system could no longer be viewed as a zero-sum game where every loss was considered a vital loss.¹⁵ The conception of "power" had to be broadened from viewing it purely in narrow terms, such as nuclear weapons parity or conventional weapons strength — as demonstrated by Vietnam, which had been sustained largely because power was judged in those terms. Power needed to be viewed in more diverse, holistic terms.¹⁶

Thus Kissinger argued that it was the wider power calculations that were consequential — a loss in one part, if made up with a gain in another part, might produce a better outcome if the US pursued its interests appropriately. He viewed this as the fundamental weakness of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, which had placed everything on the line for Vietnam to the point that they failed to keep America's global position in perspective. By viewing power in more holistic terms, the United States could be more flexible in its "perception of interests," as long as the wider balance of power was preserved. At the same time, with the shift to a more multipolar world and the diversity of interests that contributed to this balance of power, the US no longer had to remain the sole underwriter for this equilibrium and could instead work with other powers to maintain it.¹⁷

The second parameter was to accept the more uncomfortable and darker realities of the international order, especially the inability of the United States to ever escape from an international system that had conflict and disharmony inherent within it. Kissinger argued that the foreign policy conducted in previous administrations often swung "between poles of suspicion and euphoria," leading to both unhealthy isolation and over-commitment. He

¹⁴ Kissinger, Henry A. *American Foreign Policy*, 3rd edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 3rd ed., 1977). Reprinting material originally published as "Domestic Structures and Foreign Policy," *Daedalus* XCV (Spring 1996), pp. 29, 79, 97; Kissinger, Henry A. "Central Issues in American Foreign Policy." In Kermit Gordon, ed., *Agenda for the Nation* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1968). See also: Kissinger 1979, pp. 11, 39, 41–43, 65.

¹⁵ Kissinger 1968, p. 56.

¹⁶ Kissinger 1968, pp. 59–64. See also: Speech. 1976, February 3. Given by Kissinger in San Francisco, 3 February 1976; Kissinger 1979, pp. 66–67.

¹⁷ Kissinger 1979, p. 1049; Kissinger 1968, pp. 56–57, 74; Dickson, Peter W. *Kissinger and the Meaning of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 89.

advocated a realistic worldview, accepting the limits and realities of the international system but using diplomacy to navigate American interests through this complex environment.¹⁸

Kissinger believed that domestic “reform” of other societies could no longer be pursued without taking the larger perspective of the balance of power into account. Societies that reflected the United States would be desired, but Kissinger believed that societies aligned with American interests regardless of their identity were more important. Breaking from the idealism of the Kennedy Administration, he believed that creating societies that reflected America’s values at the expense of America’s interests only to led a weakened position for the United States and would confuse its strategic priorities. By downgrading the importance of identity in American foreign policy, Kissinger believed that states could engage each other on mutual interests and this could lead to a new form of “mutual restraint” in the international system. As a result, the US would be able to cooperate with states with differing identities on issues “of shared geopolitical interest transcending philosophy and history.”¹⁹

The final prerequisite was embracing the limits of America’s position in the international system. Kissinger noted, “No country can act wisely simultaneously in every part of the globe at every moment of time.”²⁰ As John Lewis Gaddis observes of the administrations before Nixon’s, “The difficulty was that objectives tended to expand as means did, thereby producing not only eventual exhaustion but also increasing resistance from other nations who would see in a quest for absolute security absolute insecurity for themselves.”²¹

Kissinger sought to weigh America’s larger interests with the limits of American power and resources more carefully than prior administrations, hoping to create a foreign policy that restored America’s position while avoiding the pitfalls of over-extension. He optimistically believed that this refined direction in American foreign policy would set the United States on a better course to compete with the Soviet Union in a multipolar world.²²

4.3. Realpolitik, the Soviet Union, and Identity

¹⁸ Statement. 1974, September 19. Kissinger statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Speech. 1975, September 16. Kissinger to Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce; Speech. 1976, February 3. Given by Kissinger in San Francisco. All in Kissinger 1979, pp. 146–147, 281, 302.

¹⁹ Kissinger 1979, pp. 69, 662–664, 914–915, 1088–1089, 1260. See also: Kissinger 1977, pp. 40, 82, 124–126, 172–173, 209–210, 282.

²⁰ Kissinger 1968, p. 74; Dickson 1978, pp. 92–94, 100–102.

²¹ Gaddis 2005, p. 277.

²² Kissinger 1968, pp. 56–57, 74. See also: Kissinger 1979, pp. 68–69.

Breaking with the perception of threats based on a state's perceived identity, Kissinger stressed in December 1969 that "we have no permanent enemies, we will judge other countries including Communist countries . . . on the basis of their actions and not on the basis of their domestic ideology." President Nixon also emphasized this in his visit to Beijing in February 1972:

We look at each country in terms of its own conduct rather than lumping them all together and saying that because they have this kind of philosophy they are all in utter darkness. I would say in honesty . . . that my views, because I was in the Eisenhower administration, were similar to those of Mr. Dulles at that time. But the world has changed since then. . . . As the Prime Minister [Zhou Enlai] has said in a meeting with Dr. Kissinger, the helmsman must ride with the waves or he will be submerged by the tide.

This redefinition of America's threat environment away from the emphasis on the ideational dimension of the Cold War reflected as well Nixon's transformation in his own personal identity. Nixon began his political career as a hard-line anti-communist, but upon reaching the pinnacle of his career he became a realist-statesman.²³

By placing interests instead of threats at the heart of conceptualizing America's foreign policy, Nixon and Kissinger recognized that to maintain an equilibrium in the balance of power, the United States was not required to form alliances with states purely based on identity. This allowed the United States to form alliances with states of differing identities to maintain a balance of power favourable to it.²⁴

Kissinger believed communism in and of itself was not the threat. Instead, the threat came from the Soviet Union's position as (in his view) an expansionary power. "To foreclose Soviet opportunities is the essence of the West's responsibility," Kissinger surmised. "It is up to us to define the limits of Soviet aims."²⁵ However, Nixon and Kissinger still viewed certain states purely in identity terms in practice, notably during the Allende presidency in Chile, amongst others. Kissinger defended this inconsistency by arguing, "[E]ven the most apparently 'independent' Communist parties of Western Europe and Latin America follow the Soviet lead in foreign policy without significant exceptions. Nor is the problem simply a matter of Communist parties. Radical politics in today's world encompass a network of sympathetic organizations and groups that cover the globe, carrying out terrorist outrages or

²³ Kissinger 1979, p. 192; Nixon 1978, pp. 562, 565.

²⁴ Kissinger 1979, p. 1063.

²⁵ Kissinger 1979, p. 116–119.

financing them, transferring weapons, infiltrating media, seeking to sway political processes.”²⁶

In Kissinger’s view, then, engaging long-standing Communist regimes was in line with America’s interests so long as it did not change the balance of power, but the United States could not allow the fall of further regimes to communism as that could alter the balance of power. Nixon emphasized this in April 1970: “If, when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.”²⁷ As much as *realpolitik* predominated, Nixon and Kissinger could not escape the influence of identity in shaping their policies.

4.4. Superpower Détente, Triangular Diplomacy, and the Nixon Doctrine

The strategy that emerged from this new thinking on America’s foreign relations was détente, the relaxing of tensions. To Nixon and Kissinger, and similarly for their predecessors, it was a form of containment, but through engagement instead of confrontation or isolation. The two statesmen hoped that by integrating the Soviet Union into the international system through cooperation and agreement, a “structure of peace” could be formed that would end the Cold War. Nixon and Kissinger’s ultimate goal, however, remained the defeat of the Soviet Union as a strategic and political force around the world.²⁸ Summing up this new approach, Kissinger wrote, “We will deal with the Communist countries on the basis of a precise understanding of what they are about in the world, and then of what we can reasonably expect of them and ourselves.”²⁹

In Kissinger’s eyes, engagement alone would not lead to a change in the Soviet Union’s behaviour. Coining the concept of “linkage,” he argued that the United States should not negotiate with the Soviet Union purely on the consideration of one particular area, but approach all areas of negotiation with the Soviet Union in the context of America’s wider strategic goals. That strategy would allow the US to link progress on one area with progress

²⁶ Kissinger 1979, p. 659.

²⁷ Speech. 1970, April 30. Nixon radio-television address. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 409.

²⁸ Gaddis 2005, pp. 286–306.

²⁹ Annual Foreign Policy Report. 1970, February 18, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office) pp. 178–179. See also: Speech. 1974, September 19. Kissinger statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

on other areas. The US would make concessions to the Soviet Union on one area, but equally would expect concessions on another area.³⁰ In a letter prepared by Kissinger in February 1969, Nixon explained his thinking on linkage:

I recognize that the previous Administration took the view that when we perceive a mutual interest on an issue with the U.S.S.R., we should pursue agreement and attempt to insulate it as much as possible from the ups and downs of conflicts elsewhere. This may well be sound on numerous bilateral and practical matters such as cultural or scientific exchanges. But, on the crucial issues of our day, I believe we must seek to advance on a front at least broad enough to make clear that we see some relationship between political and military issues. I believe that the Soviet leaders should be brought to understand that they cannot expect to reap the benefits of cooperation in one area while seeking to take advantage of tension or confrontation elsewhere.³¹

Linkage became the backbone of Nixon and Kissinger's negotiating approach. In Kissinger's eyes, it allowed the US to keep a conceptual order over America's foreign policy. He described it as "another of the attempts of the new Administration to free our foreign policy from oscillations between overextension and isolation and to ground it in a firm conception of the national interest."³²

Nixon and Kissinger believed that this approach of linkage would best be suited to pursuing the US's primary foreign policy goals *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union. These goals were an honourable settlement of the Vietnam War, a finalization of the division of Berlin, a strategic arms accord that would limit the arms gap between the US and the Soviet Union, and managing and limiting crises in the Third World to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining advantages from them. In Nixon and Kissinger's estimation, the Soviet Union's primary interests were agreeing a strategic arms agreement, securing a relaxation of trade restrictions and the provision of credits to allow the Soviet Union to gain access to Western technology and food commodities, obtaining recognition of the Soviet Union's position in Eastern Europe, and furthering its position in the Third World.³³

Triangular diplomacy, or leveraging an alliance with one state against an alliance with another state, was seen by Nixon and Kissinger as an important way to leverage conditions in the international system to their advantage and advance their foreign policy goals. Nixon wrote in 1967 that "[t]aking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its

³⁰ Hanhimaki, Jussi. "An Elusive Grand Design." In Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³¹ Letter. 1969, February 4. Nixon to Rogers, Laird, and Helms. In Kissinger 1979, p. 136.

³² Kissinger 1979, pp. 129–130.

³³ Kissinger 1979, pp. 127–130, 265–269; Nixon 1978, p. 346.

neighbors.”³⁴ By forming a relationship with China, the Soviet Union’s predominant rival in the Third World, Kissinger sought to use it to put pressure on Moscow to make concessions to Washington. In a foreign policy campaign speech penned for his former mentor, Nelson Rockefeller, Kissinger stressed that the United States should learn “to deal imaginatively with several competing centres of Communist power. . . . In a subtle triangle of relations between Washington, Peking, and Moscow, we improve the possibilities of accommodation with each as we increase our options with both.”³⁵

As the Soviet ambassador to Washington during Nixon’s presidency, Anatoly Dobrynin, notes, Nixon’s opening to China caught Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev by surprise and put the US in a more advantageous position to negotiate with the Soviet Union. Moscow now faced an environment where its two geopolitical rivals, China and the United States, were cooperating with one another to limit the Soviet Union’s influence.³⁶ This created an opportunity for the United States to take a more measured approach to the Third World, which was complimentary to Nixon and Kissinger’s overall views on America’s interests and also to the US’s more fragile strategic position during the 1970s.³⁷

The US’s approach to the Third World became known as the Nixon Doctrine. Unveiled in a speech in Guam in July 1969, Nixon announced:

First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments. Second, we shall provide a shield if nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security. Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.³⁸

Kissinger expounded further: “[T]he United States will participate in the defence and development of allies and friends, but that America cannot — and will not — conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions and undertake all the defence of

³⁴ Nixon, Richard M. “Asia after Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* 46:1 (October 1967), pp. 121–123; Kissinger 1977, pp. 38–39.

³⁵ Kissinger 1979, pp. 165–170.

³⁶ Dobrynin, Anatoly. *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents* (Spokane, WA: University of Washington Press, 1995).

³⁷ Gaddis 2005, p. 295.

³⁸ Press Briefing. Press Briefing on Guam. 1969, July 25 *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1969), pp. 544–545.

the free nations of the world. Our interests must shape our commitments, rather than the other way around.”³⁹

Viewing the US’s predominant threat in the international system as the Soviet Union, similar to previous administrations, Nixon and Kissinger structured a wider policy that sought to contain the influence of the Soviet Union. However, unlike other administrations, the two men brought a new conceptual approach to restoring America’s position in the international system after the experience of Vietnam, as well as to navigating a more constrained multi-polar world. This approach, in their estimation, worked only in conjunction with their centralization of control in the White House.

4.5. A Crisis in Jordan

The first Middle Eastern crisis of President Nixon’s tenure occurred in September 1970 in Jordan, the only Arab state in the region that the United States had amicable relations with after the 1967 war. Viewing American foreign policy priorities in the context of their wider obligations in the international system, the Middle East was treated as a lower priority compared to other areas of the world where American interests were under threat. Peace negotiations surrounding the implementation of the post-1967 settlement were delegated to Nixon’s secretary of state, William Rogers, while Nixon and Kissinger handled more pressing international issues.

Jordan’s Black September in 1970 moved the Middle East close to the top of the White House’s foreign policy agenda. The crisis underscored the deep structural tensions in the region, in particular the impact the stateless Palestinian community had on the stability of Israel’s neighbouring states and on its own security. The crisis deepened the relationship between the United States and Israel and heightened tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. It also necessitated Nixon and Kissinger taking a more active role in the region and precipitated a shift in management responsibilities from the State Department to the White House in terms of peace initiatives. Finally, the effects of this crisis upended the regional landscape, deepening tensions between Israel and its neighbours and rupturing the stability of Lebanon.

³⁹ Annual Foreign Policy Report. 1970, February 18, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office), pp. 118–119; Speech. 1969, November 3. Nixon radio–television address. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1969), pp. 905–906.

In a move that would have far wider ramifications, the crisis began on the 6th of September 1970, when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked five planes with Israelis, Americans, and Europeans aboard. The PFLP took the 273 hostages to Dawson's Field, 30 miles east of Amman, Jordan. Notably, both Syria and Iraq, while supporters of the Palestinian cause, came out publicly against the hijacking and the PFLP, even though evidence emerged later that Iraq had colluded with the Palestinian front in the hijackings.⁴⁰

Responding to the hijacking and the deepening civil unrest, King Hussein of Jordan deployed his army to encircle Dawson's Field, where the PFLP was holding the majority of its hostages. The PFLP hoped that they could use the hostages they had taken as bargaining chips to secure the release of Palestinian militants in European and Israeli prisons. King Hussein assured the US government that none of the PFLP hijackers would be taken alive if they attempted to kill the hostages.⁴¹

Even though Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was not involved in the hijacking, the hostage-taking placed the Palestinian community in conflict with the king of Jordan and gave Yasir Arafat, the newly-elected chairman of the PLO, an opportunity to further contest King Hussein's rule. As a Situation Report from the State Department Operation's Center from the 7th of September 1970 notes, "[Embassy Amman] reports a near-anarchical condition in most areas of the city, with instances of shooting, auto theft, and persons subjected to search at fedayeen roadblocks. Some clashes between Palestinian commandos and the Jordan Army have apparently occurred outside Amman."⁴²

The eruption of the civil war between the PLO and the Jordanian government and the hijacking crisis in September 1970 deeply concerned Nixon and Kissinger. In their view, the fall of the king of Jordan and the emergence of a radicalized Palestinian state would threaten

⁴⁰ Telegram. 1970, September 6. From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 330, Subject Files, Hijackings; Memorandum. 1970, September 6. Memorandum for the Record. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 330, Subject Files, Hijackings; Memorandum. 1970, September 6. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 646, Country Files, Middle East, Middle East General, Vol. VII.

⁴¹ Telegram. 1970, September 8. From the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan. National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970-73, AV 12. Secret. Immediate. Nodis.

⁴² Paper. 1970, September 7. Prepared by the NEA Working Group in the Department of State Operations Center. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 330, Subject Files, Hijackings; Memorandum. 1970, September 9. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-077, WSAG Meetings, WSAG Meeting Middle East 9/19/70.

the post-1967 security architecture in the Middle East and could potentially imperil Israel's future. Such a state could also draw the region back into war and give an opening for the Soviet Union to increase its involvement in the region. Nixon could not afford to let Moscow capitalize on these events.⁴³

4.6. King Hussein and the PLO

While this crisis came to the attention of the United States with the hijackings in 1970, Jordan's deteriorating domestic situation had been a constant concern for King Hussein since the end of the Six-Day War. With the loss of the West Bank, the PFLP and Yasir Arafat's PLO moved to the East Bank, accompanied by thousands of Palestinian refugees. By 1970, the Palestinian refugee community accounted for almost 70 per cent of Jordan's population. Living in large refugee camps and cities across Jordan, particularly concentrated around Amman, the PLO established a "state within a state" where it and Palestinian militant groups used this space to support the "War of Attrition," led by Egypt with the Jordanian government's formal participation, against Israel after the 1967 war. This War of Attrition, in the form of cross-border raids and attacks, was persistently irritating to Israel, and allowed the PLO and associated militant groups to launch attacks from Jordanian territory against Israel. Despite Israel's costly retaliatory strikes on Jordanian territory, King Hussein participated in the war to avoid a potential Palestinian rebellion against his rule.⁴⁴

As a consequence, the heavy concentration of armed Palestinian militants in Jordan led inevitably to clashes between Jordan's army and these militants, who after the 1967 war felt increasingly confident in their position as result of both popular support in the Arab world and also financial and military support. The summer of 1970 was particularly violent, with the Jordanian army engaging in direct skirmishes with Palestinian militants. During the week of the 9th to the 16th of June 1970, over 1,000 people suffered fatalities or were wounded, underscoring the fragility of King Hussein's rule. Under regional diplomatic pressure, King Hussein and Yasir Arafat agreed in Cairo on the 10th of July 1970 to de-escalate the inter-communal fighting. Hussein affirmed his support of the Palestinian cause and agreed to continue to allow the PLO to launch attacks against Israel in exchange for

⁴³ Minutes. 1970, September 9, 11:40am–12:35 pm. Combined Washington Special Actions Group and Review Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970.

⁴⁴ Shlaim, Avi. *Lion of Jordan: The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 2008), Ch. 14.

Arafat's commitment to respecting the king's rule and de-militarizing the Palestinian refugee camps.⁴⁵

This agreement lasted only for a short period of time as a result of both internal and external circumstances. Internally, King Hussein, under pressure from the army and the royal family, used this agreement to try to actively regulate Palestinian operations within Jordan, including the introduction of identity cards, leading to increased tension between the Palestinians and the Jordanian government. Externally, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's recognition that a continued low-intensity War of Attrition against Israel was unsustainable resulted in him and King Hussein agreeing a ceasefire with Israel in July 1970. This agreement angered the Palestinian political and militant groups within Jordan, which expected the king to continue to honour his agreement and to support their armed political cause against Israel. Both George Habash, the leader of the PFLP, and Yasir Arafat rejected the king's formal ceasefire and accused him of breaking their agreement, calling him a "Zionist tool."⁴⁶ In a particularly sharp statement, Yasir Arafat pledged on the 15th of August 1970 that "[w]e have decided to convert Jordan into a cemetery for all conspirators — Amman shall be Hanoi of the revolution."⁴⁷ The differences between the king and the Palestinian militias further escalated, and King Hussein's life was repeatedly threatened by Palestinian militants. The hijackings were the final straw for King Hussein.⁴⁸

4.7. The View from Washington

The PFLP hijackings and Arafat's subsequent escalation of the crisis raised the urgency of the situation in Jordan. In meetings at the White House, the reports and assessments from the embassy in Amman, the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA painted a bleak picture of the situation in Jordan and its potential impact on the peace and security of the region. Significant questions were raised in Washington Special Action Group meetings in the White House over whether the king alone could suppress the Palestinian militias and their potential regional allies.⁴⁹ Joseph Sisco, the under-secretary of state for political affairs, detailed the situation in the 9th of September Washington Special Actions Group meeting: "We have just sent a telegram to our Embassies, pointing out that with each successive tiny

⁴⁵ Ashton, Nigel. *King Hussein of Jordan: A Political Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), Ch. 8.

⁴⁶ Cobban, Helena. *The Palestine Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 48–49.

⁴⁷ Chronology, "Jordan: Annual Review of 1970," FCO 17/1411, PRO.

⁴⁸ Ashton 2008; Shlaim 2008.

⁴⁹ Paper. 1970, September 7. Prepared by the NEA Working Group in the Department of State Operations Center. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 330, Subject Files, Hijackings.

crisis, the King's position becomes a little weaker. . . . If he delays longer, he will be weaker. At least now he still has the Army."⁵⁰

Despite the king's recognition that he needed to take more proactive steps to confront this growing threat to his rule, he equally was hesitant to alienate Arab public opinion and his neighbours.⁵¹ Richard Helms, the director of the CIA, stressed in a Washington Special Actions Group meeting on the 10th of September that "[h]e is simply not willing to take on the Palestinians in his Kingdom, with the possible help they would receive from the Iraqis, possibly the Syrians."⁵²

The White House also viewed the conflict in terms of its contestation with the Soviet Union. In his 10th September Washington Special Actions Group meeting, Kissinger raised an important question: "Suppose the King asks the Israelis (or the US) for help against the Fedayeen or Iraq and Israel gets involved. What do we need to hold the ring against the Soviets?" David Packard, a senior aide in the Department of Defense, responded, "There are two ways the Soviets might become involved . . . through unlimited support for Egypt, Iraq, etc.; there is no way we can stop them from doing that; or . . . if they should intervene with their forces, we could do these other things."⁵³

Acknowledging the impact that this crisis has had on Nixon's peace initiatives with Israel after the 1967 war, Kissinger noted, "In the present situation in Jordan, the peace initiative doesn't have a prayer. We can't ask the Israelis to negotiate a border arrangement with a government that isn't in control of its country."⁵⁴ Also aware of how this change in the regional environment could impact the balance of power in favour of "radical" states aligned with the Soviet Union, Kissinger noted, "It would push Nasser in a radical direction and

⁵⁰ Minutes. 1970, September 9, 11:40am–12:35 pm. Combined Washington Special Actions Group and Review Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970.

⁵¹ Telegram. 1970, September 9. From the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 330, Subject Files, Hijackings.

⁵² Minutes. 1970, September 10, 3:15–4 pm. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, Washington Special Actions Group, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Minutes. 1970, September 9, 11:40am–12:35 pm. Combined Washington Special Actions Group and Review Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970.

would push the Soviets that way and would make the Israelis unwilling to accept compromises.”⁵⁵

Expanding on the effect the crisis would have on Nixon’s peace initiatives, in a Memorandum to President Nixon on the 16th of September, Kissinger notes:

—Prospects for a Palestine settlement soon on terms Israel could consider would drop to almost zero. Attacks across Israel’s eastern border would increase.

—Chances that Israel would at some point feel compelled to seize more territory in Jordan would increase sharply.

—Nasser’s ability to negotiate a settlement with Israel and Soviet ability to support a negotiated settlement would be diminished sharply.

—There would be one more radical state in the Middle East where the U.S. is barred. A radical fedayeen base there would strengthen the movement against Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Persian Gulf states.⁵⁶

The crisis in Jordan thus presented President Nixon and Henry Kissinger a challenge that in their perception could have upended their position in the Middle East and could have led the Soviet Union to increase its involvement in the region.

4.8. A Game of Nerves

As these discussions were underway in Washington, by the second week of September the situation on the ground in Jordan had begun to change. Deciding to take action against the PLO, King Hussein launched an expansive assault to regain control of Amman on the 17th of September.⁵⁷ On the 15th of September, the Palestinian militias had proclaimed that Irbid had come under their control. Entering Amman, where the largest concentration of Palestinian militants were located, Jordan’s 60th Armored Brigade launched an assault against the Wahadat and Al-Hussein refugee camps and the civilian Palestinian areas of

⁵⁵ Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 17, 9 am. President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

⁵⁶ Memorandum. 1970, September 16. Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 615, Country Files, Middle East, Jordan, Vol. V.

⁵⁷ Memorandum. 1970, September 17, 7:30 am. Memorandum From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-077, Washington Special Actions Group Meetings, WSAG Meeting Middle East 9/17/70 AM.

Amman. Encircling Ibrid, Jerash, Salt, and Zarqa, which were occupied by Palestinian militias, the Jordanian army shelled these cities with mortars.⁵⁸

In response to King Hussein's assault, Yasir Arafat actively appealed for outside assistance. King Hussein's actions angered Jordan's neighbours, with the Syrian Foreign Ministry warning the Jordanian ambassador in Damascus that Syria would not watch the Palestinians get "massacred." On the 17th of September, Alexander Haig, the Deputy National Security Advisor, noted that Iraqi senior officials had met to discuss whether to send their Saladin forces — a guerrilla paramilitary force — to support the PLO. In addition, Syrian forces reportedly began to amass in Dera'a, Syria, a town close to Irbid, Jordan.⁵⁹

In a telephone conversation between President Nixon and Kissinger on the 12th of September 1970 in which the two men weighed the options the US should consider to support King Hussein, Nixon initially stressed that an American military option may be preferable to an Israeli option. "If the Israelis did it the ceasefire would go out the window," the president remarked.⁶⁰

In a telephone conversation between Kissinger and Nixon on the 17th of September on the response to a potential Iraqi and Syrian intervention, Nixon further stressed, "If they move, my strong feeling at this time is that we should use American air and knock the bejesus out of them."⁶¹ As a contingency to support King Hussein's government, Nixon deployed the 6th Fleet to the Mediterranean, including the USS Independence and the USS Saratoga, and ordered the 82nd Airborne Division to prepare for a possible intervention in Jordan.⁶² The US

⁵⁸ Shlaim 2008.

⁵⁹ Memorandum. 1970, September 17, 7:30 am. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-077, Washington Special Actions Group Meetings, WSAG Meeting Middle East 9/17/70 AM.

⁶⁰ Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 12, 6:15 pm. President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

⁶¹ Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 17, 9 am. President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

⁶² Minutes. 1970, September 17, 7:32–8:50 am. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, Washington Special Actions Group, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970.

also deployed six C-130 aircraft to Incirlik, Turkey, to assist with a possible evacuation of American personnel in Jordan.⁶³

Understanding the psychological value of positioning military forces in the Mediterranean, Nixon noted, “The wear and tear on the nerves between the Syrians and Iraqis is very important.”⁶⁴ Nixon believed that a substantive show of force would support his and Kissinger’s efforts to keep the conflict in Jordan from escalating into a regional war. Noting the impact these deployments would have on relations with the Soviet Union, Nixon emphasized, “This will show whether we have any stake at all left in the Mediterranean.”⁶⁵ Noting the upsides of this approach, Kissinger told William Rogers, “And if we pull it [off] the peace offensive has a real chance. It would be good for credibility with the Israelis and show the Arabs that moderation is the only course. And we would have a chance of getting a government there that can make peace. We may come out very well.”⁶⁶

4.9. View from Damascus and the Ba’ath Party’s Changing Foreign Policy Orientation

Syria’s interactions with Jordan in 1970 can be best understood in the context of the turbulent domestic politics after the Ba’ath Party came to power in March 1963 in the wake of the break up of the United Arab Republic. The new leadership was divided on both the interpretation of and the implementation of the Ba’ath Party’s ideology of Arab nationalism and socialism. This split was both generational and ideational with Michel Aflaq (the leader of the Ba’ath Party) and Salah al-Din Bitar (the Prime Minister of Syria), the intellectual founders of the movement, interested in a more moderate course that emphasized a conciliatory foreign policy with Nasser, gradual social reforms, and a more democratic process. The new generation of Ba’athist leadership- the Party’s military committee- believed a more radical course should be taken. The military committee included Saleh Jadid, Muhammad Umran, Ahmad Suwayadani, Salim Hatoum, and Hafiz al-Asad, who became chief of staff of the Air Force in 1963.⁶⁷

⁶³ Memorandum. 1970, September 9, 9 am. Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 330, Subject Files, Hijackings.

⁶⁴ Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 17, 9 am. President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 17, 9:20 am. President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and Secretary of State Rogers. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

⁶⁷ Hinnebusch 2001, ch. 3.

After the break up of the Ba'ath Party by Nasser after the formation of the UAR, this group of officers formed a military committee in secret to try revive the Ba'ath Party as a political movement. Hafiz al-Asad, who was involved in Ba'athist politics from his 20s, was the first in his family sent to study in Latakia for a formal education, and then joined the Air Force to further advance his career. Coming from a rural and minority background, Asad identified deeply with the party's support for land and socio-economic reforms. He also strongly identified with their view that the struggle with Israel and the reclamation of Palestinian rights after the disastrous defeat in 1948 was the struggle of their generation. Even though he was at a lower rank than other officers involved in the military committee, Asad rose quickly through the ranks of the military committee. Despite an initial failed attempt to bring the Ba'ath party into power in 1962, this group succeeded in seizing power in March 1963. In control of the main levers of coercive control in the state, the military committee leadership more so than Aflaq and Bitar, the political leadership of the party, were in a stronger position to shape the future policies of a Ba'ath government.⁶⁸

At the Ba'ath Party's Sixth National Congress, much to the opposition of Aflaq and Bitar, Jadid and the military committee along with an alliance of more leftist intellectuals in the Ba'ath Party succeeded in re-orientating the Party to focus on "revolution in one country" than pan-Arab unionism. They rejected Aflaq's more moderate course of socialist reform. In terms of foreign policy, the Party refocused Syria away from its previous policies of trying to build a pan-Arab union with Nasser and instead, adopt a new interpretation of Ba'athist ideology, which focused on challenging Israel on behalf of the Palestinians and also the Western aligned Arab monarchies which refused to use oil as a weapon against Israel and its Western allies. This new foreign policy also sought to emphasize Syria's independence from the traditional centre of Arab nationalist political gravity in the Arab world, Egypt. This new foreign policy orientation resonated with Asad.⁶⁹

Divisions within the Ba'ath Party were further exacerbated by opposition within Syrian society to Ba'ath Party's policies which sought to refashion Syria's social contract in favour of Syria's rural population at the expense of the traditional urban elites' economic and political interests and also, to its liberal use of the army to suppress any opposition to its policies. Sunni political elites were also increasingly side-lined by the growing role of the army in the day-to-day affair of the state. The army importantly was undergoing changes as well with an increasing recruitment of rural Ba'ath party members and minorities into its ranks at the expense of Sunnis. The Ba'ath Party officers sought to weaken the position of

⁶⁸ Batatu 1999, ch. 14.

⁶⁹ Hinnebusch 2001, ch. 3.

the urban Sunni elite and army officers who wished to re-unite Syria with Egypt under Nasser's leadership.⁷⁰

Hoping to capitalize on this domestic opposition, Aflaq and the moderates sought to foil Jadid and the more radical wing of the Ba'ath Party from fully implementing their policy changes by forming alliances with these groups in Syrian society who lost the most from the radical wing of the Ba'ath Party's empowerment of Syria's rural base at the expense of their interests. However, Aflaq's initiatives could never obtain the full support of the army or the Ba'ath Party political ranks. To prevent further divisions within the Party, Jadid led a coup in February 1966, which expelled Aflaq and his wing from the Ba'ath Party. This allowed Jadid to broaden his initiatives to overhaul Syria's economy and society, and as well Syria's foreign policy orientation.⁷¹

Divorcing Syria's foreign policy completely from Aflaq's original vision for a Ba'athist foreign policy, as Raymond Hinnebusch notes, Jadid sought to make "Syria the Hanoi of an Arab Revolution" and a frontline challenger to Israel. Jadid stepped up the funding of the Palestinian Fedayeen who used Syrian territory to launch attacks against Israel, launched a propaganda campaign against Western aligned Arab monarchies, suspended the Iraq Petroleum Company's pipeline which went across Syria, and attempted to broaden Syria's relationship with the Soviet Union. Hanna Batatu observed that Jadid, personally, lacked a deep knowledge of foreign affairs, and critically misjudged Syria's position of strength relative to Israel. This misjudgement resulted in Jadid making the decision that Syria, with Egyptian assistance, could launch a pre-emptive strike against Israel in June of 1967.⁷²

Despite supporting Jadid's coup in 1966, Hafiz al-Asad, promoted to Secretary of Defence in the wake of the coup, had personal reservations about going to war against Israel in 1967. He doubted whether Syria's military forces were prepared to confront Israel on the battlefield. Mustafa Tlas, a senior military officer and then Defence Minister under Hafiz al-Asad, once observed that "[w]hat dragged Syria into a war for which it was ill prepared was Saleh Jadid's policy indulging in verbal violence and challenges to Egypt concerning the Palestinian issue." However, Syria's president, Nureddin al-Atassi, and Saleh Jadid, disagreed and urged Nasser to confront Israel over Syria's border disputes with Israel. To move Nasser to take military action, Jadid over-exaggerated the threats to Nasser.⁷³ Jadid

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Batatu 1999, ch. 12; Hinnebusch, 2001, ch. 3.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Talhami, Ghada Hashem. *Syria and the Palestinians: The Clash of Nations* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001).

believed Syria could defeat Israel with Egyptian assistance. Ghada Hashem Talhami notes that in the period running up to the war, Jadid became “more freewheeling and leftist, often pushing the government in the direction of serious confrontations with the public.”⁷⁴

Hafiz al-Asad also differed with Jadid and Atassi over the status of the Palestinian resistance movement and their use of Syrian territory to launch attacks against Israel. Asad viewed such actions as unnecessarily inviting conflict with Israel, and found the PLO and associated militias’ behaviour on Syrian territory deeply disconcerting. The PLO, similar to how they would act in Jordan, acted in Syria as if they were above the law and not accountable to the Syrian government. Jadid and Atassi, supportive of the Palestinian struggle, were more sympathetic and did not object to their behaviour. In contrast, Asad believed that Palestinian militant groups operating in Syria needed to respect Syrian law.⁷⁵

The Six–Day War in 1967 was a complete failure for Syria’s leadership. None of the Syrian leadership had expected that Israel would retaliate with such force, and even when Syria was ready to declare a ceasefire Israel pushed forward and took the Golan Heights. This failure in 1967 added further tensions within the Ba’th Party: a number of party members blamed Saleh Jadid, and others blamed Hafiz al-Asad. It also produced public criticism of the Ba’th Party. As Patrick Seale notes, Asad emerged from the 1967 war with an interest in re-shaping Syria’s leadership and position in the region. Asad blamed Jadid and his allies in the Ba’th Party for leading Syria astray and for pursuing radical policies. He also disagreed with Jadid’s continued support for the PLO using Syrian territory to attack Israel, viewing this as only welcoming more conflict with Israel and as being ill advised.⁷⁶

Tensions between Asad and Jadid continued into 1970, with differences over everything from foreign policy to domestic policy. Asad believed that Syria should focus on building up its position in relation to Israel before taking actions that could provoke another Arab–Israeli conflict; he also wanted to improve relations with the Soviet Union who viewed Jadid as unstable. Hoping to bring more pragmatism and moderation to Syria’s Ba’thist foreign policy, Asad also sought to improve relations with Iraq, despite Iraq’s alignment with Aflaq’s wing of the Ba’ath Party. Jadid and Atassi, however, were focused more on internal reform and radical politics after the June 1967 War. Despite Asad’s opposition, Jadid gave the PLO more freedom of movement to use Syrian territory to launch attacks against Israel and refused to send a Syrian delegation to the Arab League’s Khartoum summit in 1967

⁷⁴ Talhami 2001, p. 89.

⁷⁵ Ibid, Ch. 4; Seale, Patrick. *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988), ch. 9.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

which would have led to Syria receiving much-needed financial aid. Jadid and Atassi viewed Syria's Arab neighbours as too easily capitulating to Israel at the expense of the Palestinians, and believed that Syria could go it alone to advance the Palestinian cause.⁷⁷ This leftist and radical tilt in Syrian foreign policy made Asad conclude that the Syrians were "captives of the Palestine question."⁷⁸

In order to contain Jadid's radical politics, Asad consolidated his control over the army and the security forces in the state. Asad even replaced officers from strategic commands in the military he considered disloyal to him. In an attempt to regulate the Palestinian militias operating in Syria, Asad created a Syrian-backed Palestinian militia, the Saqa'a. Drafting Palestinians into the militia, it was under the regulation of and equipped by the Syrian government, though Jadid contested control over the Saqa'a. Asad also came into control of the Palestine Liberation Army, the People's Army, and the other security services within the state. Importantly, he also clamped down on Palestinian militias using Syria to attack Israel. Such action deepened the animosity between Jadid and Asad even further.⁷⁹

When the conflict broke out in Jordan in 1970, the Syrian leadership — including Asad — was under pressure to support the Palestinians. Asad agreed with Jadid that Syria needed to take action to support the Palestinians, but also recognized the limits of such action. He established a military command in Dera'a to coordinate Syria's operations in Jordan.⁸⁰

4.10. Syria and Iraq's Limited Intervention

Beginning on the 18th of September 1970, Iraq and Syria escalated their intervention in Jordan. From the end of the 1967 war, and despite King Hussein's discomfort with this troop presence, 19,000 Iraqi soldiers had been stationed in eastern Jordan. Israeli intelligence, monitoring the unfolding situation in Jordan, first confirmed to the US that the As-Sa'iqa, a Syrian-backed Palestinian militia, had entered Jordan from Syria on the 18th of December and had engaged Jordan's 40th Armoured Brigade, but was defeated and Syria's militia lost 30 tanks. However, hours later, 300 tanks and a mechanized regular army infantry column with PLA markings entered from Syria and moved successfully towards Irbid.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Talhami 2001, Ch. 4.

⁷⁸ Talhami 2001, p. 90.

⁷⁹ Talhami 2001, Ch. 4.

⁸⁰ Ibid; Seale 1988, Ch. 9.

⁸¹ Telegram. 1970, September 19. From the Department of State to the Embassy in Iran. National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970-73, POL 23-9 JORDAN; Memorandum. 1970, September 19. Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files),

During a Washington Special Actions Group meeting on the 20th of September, General Vogt, in assessing the military capabilities of the Iraqi and Syrian armies, noted “these 19,000 Iraqi troops are a ragged bunch” and the Syrians “are not much better.”⁸² The US concluded that King Hussein could largely contain an intervention by Syria on his own, but would have trouble doing so if Iraq substantially intervened as well. This prospect became a reality with the news that an armed Iraqi military convoy had gone into northern Jordan, further tipping the number of armed tanks against Jordan.⁸³

Jordan’s initial success in battle started to change with Syrian gains on the ground. On the 20th of September, Syrian columns successfully entered Irbid, raising alarm about the prospects of Syrian forces heading for Amman. In the Washington Special Action Group meeting that day, Admiral Moorer warned that it was “nip and tuck” on the likelihood that Jordanian forces could contain the Syrian army.⁸⁴ In a call to Secretary Rogers, King Hussein warned, “Situation deteriorating dangerously following Syrian massive invasion. Northern forces disbanded. [Irbid] occupied. Having disastrous effect. . . . I request immediate intervention, both air and land to safeguard independence of Jordan. Immediate airstrike from any quarter plus air cover are imperative. . . .”⁸⁵

4.11. Soviet–American tensions

With the king’s loss of important territory in northern Jordan to Syrian forces, Nixon and Kissinger believed that the Soviet Union played a pivotal role in the Syrian and Iraqi interventions. Nixon reflected in his memoirs, “We could not allow Hussein to be overthrown by a Soviet-inspired Insurrection. If it succeeded, the entire Middle East might erupt in war. . . . It was like a ghastly game of dominoes, with a nuclear [war] waiting at the end.”⁸⁶ Viewing Iraq and Syria, two states the US did not have diplomatic relations with, as purely satellite states of the Soviet Union, Nixon and Kissinger believed these states were under the direction of Moscow.

Box H-077, Washington Special Actions Group Meetings, WSAG Meeting Middle East 9/19/70; Memorandum. 1970, September 20, 3:30 pm. Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 615, Country Files, Middle East, Jordan, Vol. V.

⁸² Minutes. 1970, September 20, 7:10–9:15 am. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, Washington Special Actions Group, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 20, 10:10 pm. President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Secretary of State Rogers, and the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

⁸⁶ Nixon 1978.

When the crisis broke out in Jordan, Moscow called on both the PLO and King Hussein to show restraint and also urged the US and Israel to not take any substantive action against the PLO in Jordan. With the US positioning its fleet in the Mediterranean, the Soviet Navy increased its presence in the area. In a telegram from the State Department on the 18th of September 1970, the US Embassy in Moscow reported, “The Soviet Government for its part has deemed it necessary to urge the leaders of Jordan, Iraq, Syria and the United Arab Republic to take measures dictated by the situation in order at the earliest point to put an end to the fratricidal clashes in Jordan and to prevent the outbreak of civil war.”⁸⁷

To assuage Soviet concerns about the potential actions the US might have taken to support the king of Jordan, the White House emphasized the limited nature of their proposed action. Nixon hoped to persuade the Soviet Union to restrain Iraq and Syria. In a Washington Special Actions Group meeting, Joseph Sisco, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, noted that the US should stress to the Soviets that it did not seek to “broaden the conflict.” Richard Helms, the director of the CIA, supported this move, saying, “We should make clear that we are striking against the Iraqis or the Syrians, not the Fedayeen.”⁸⁸

In exploring Soviet motivations in Jordan, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, a senior aide to Kissinger, wrote:

The probable chaos resulting from the King’s overthrow and the psychological impetus that would give to the Iraqi and Syrian regimes cannot be something the Soviets would watch with much satisfaction or equanimity. On the other hand, Jordan has never been of special concern to the Soviets except in that it reflected the basic policy toward the UAR. The disappearance of a regime influenced by, and sympathetic toward the US would also represent a gain of sorts for the USSR.

Sonnenfeldt believed that while Syria and Iraq were states that the Soviet Union had influence in, its most important state was the United Arab Republic (UAR). He argued that how the UAR’s President Nasser reacted would determine the course of Soviet support.⁸⁹

Discussions in the White House touched on the possible role Nasser, the Soviet’s principle ally in the region, could play in changing the Soviet Union’s perceptions of the conflict. If Nasser could be convinced that an intervention in Jordan was harmful to his interests, the

⁸⁷ Telegram. 1970, September 18. From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union. National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL 23–9 JORDAN.

⁸⁸ Minutes. 1970, September 17, 7:32–8:50 am. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H–114, Washington Special Actions Group, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970.

⁸⁹ Memorandum. 1970, September 18. Memorandum From Helmut Sonnenfeldt of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 615, Country Files, Middle East, Jordan, Vol. V.

Soviet Union could be persuaded by Nasser to apply pressure on the Syrians and the Iraqis. Nasser, who had previously played a role in negotiations between the PLO and Hussein, expressed interest in negotiating an end to the conflict in Jordan.⁹⁰ A State Department telegram on the 19th of September noted, “King Hussein met for three hours yesterday with Egyptian Chief of Staff Sadiq, the special envoy of the three Arab presidents — Numayri of Sudan, Qaddafi of Libya, and Nasser of Egypt — sent to discuss the situation. Sadiq expressed sympathy for Hussein’s position but urged that ‘the time had come to stop the bloodshed.’”⁹¹ The UAR’s negotiations were supported by signs that the Soviet Union had moved to apply pressure on the Palestinians to negotiate with the king of Jordan.⁹²

However, despite these signs of Soviet mediation, President Nixon’s own wariness about the Soviets’ intentions in the Middle East was not assuaged. In a phone conversation with Nixon on the 20th of September, Kissinger reported, “Incidentally, we picked up an intelligence report this morning — not very reliable — but interesting that the Russians gave the Syrians a carte blanche which proves when you told me Friday night they may be playing us, your instinct about the Russians is usually remarkable.”⁹³

4.12. The Israel Option

With the situation in Jordan deteriorating and reports that Syrian forces were moving south of Irbid towards Amman, Nixon and Kissinger revisited the idea of using American air forces to secure Hussein’s position. Kissinger argued that Israel was strategically in a better position to respond to the situation in Jordan, and Nixon — who initially supported direct

⁹⁰ Memorandum. 1970, September 19. Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-077, Washington Special Actions Group Meetings, WSAG Meeting Middle East 9/19/70; Memorandum. 1970, September 19. Memorandum From Helmut Sonnenfeldt of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 615, Country Files, Middle East, Jordan, Vol. V.

⁹¹ Memorandum. 1970, September 19. Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-077, Washington Special Actions Group Meetings, WSAG Meeting Middle East 9/19/70.

⁹² Memorandum. 1970, September 19. Memorandum From Helmut Sonnenfeldt of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 615, Country Files, Middle East, Jordan, Vol. V.

⁹³ Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 20. President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

military action by the United States — decided to back Kissinger's approach to the Israelis.⁹⁴

Negotiations between Kissinger and Israeli Ambassador to the United States Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir began on the 21st of September. In conversations with the White House, Rabin discussed the potential employment of an air campaign that would target Syrian and Iraqi forces in Jordan, but which would not touch targets inside Jordan's neighbours or the Palestinian militants themselves. Tel Aviv suggested that an air campaign alone would not be sufficient, but despite his precarious position King Hussein believed that the risks of an Israeli ground offensive could lead to Israel potentially occupying more of Jordan's land, as well as lowering his standing in the Arab world further. He thus advised against such action. As a condition for their support in intervening in Jordan, Meir and Rabin requested that the US provide significant military aid. With Nixon and Kissinger promising a large aid package in return for Tel Aviv's assistance, Israel began to mobilize forces to the Jordanian and Syrian borders as well as plan for an air campaign.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Minutes. 1970, September 10, 3:15–4 pm. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, Washington Special Actions Group, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970; Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 17, 9:30 am. President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and Secretary of State Rogers. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files; Minutes. 1970, September 17, 3:20–3:45 pm. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, Washington Special Actions Group, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970; Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 21, 5:30 am. President Nixon, the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), and the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files; Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 21, about 5:45 am. Telephone Conversation Among the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), and the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

⁹⁵ Ashton 2008; Shlaim 2008; Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 21, about 6:15 am. Telephone Conversation Among the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), and Secretary of State Rogers. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files; Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 21, 6:30 am. Telephone Conversation Between the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and Secretary of Defense Laird. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files; Minutes. 1970, September 21, 8:45am. National Security Council Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-109, NSC Meeting Minutes, NSC Minutes Originals 1970; Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 21, 11:50 am. President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files; Minutes. 1970, September 21, 4:25–5 pm. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-114, Washington Special Action Group, WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970; Telegram. 1970,

Confident of Israeli support, Hussein employed his Air Force and armoured divisions against Syrian forces in northern Jordan on the 22nd and 23rd of September. These actions succeeded in forcing the Syrian forces to retreat and allowed the Jordanian army to secure Irbid and the north. A conflict that had looked days earlier to be an existential crisis managed to be resolved without American or Israeli military action. The formal decision by the Israeli cabinet to authorize a military campaign against Syria was not needed.⁹⁶ With Syrian forces out of Jordan, King Hussein launched an all-out offensive against the Palestinians and inflicted significant losses on the PLO and PFLP. This action prompted Nasser to convene peace talks between the PLO and King Hussein to stop the fighting. A peace agreement was signed on the 26th of September 1970 that ended the civil war. However, this tenuous agreement lasted less than a year, and by July 1971 the PLO had been driven out of Jordan to Lebanon.⁹⁷

4.13. Asad's Strategic Disengagement and Seizure of Power

Patrick Seale recalls that in his conversations with the Syrian president, Asad supported the intervention in Jordan, arguing that the Syrian government could not watch as the Palestinians — a group of people inherently linked to Syria's Arab identity — were slaughtered by the Jordanian military. Importantly, however, Asad never envisioned creating a Palestinian state in Jordan or overthrowing the king, despite American policymakers raising those fears. In Seale's interview with Asad, the Syrian President recalls:

September 22. From the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel. National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970-73, POL 27 ARAB-ISR. Nodis; Telephone Conversation. 1970, September 21, 7:20 pm. Telephone Conversation Between the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Sisco). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Box 30, Chronological Files.

⁹⁶ Minutes. 1970, September 21, 6 pm. National Security Council Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-109, NSC Meeting Minutes, NSC Minutes Originals 1970; Telegram. 1970, September 22. From the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel. National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970-73, POL 27 ARAB-ISR. Nodis; Minutes. 1970, September 22, noon. National Security Council Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-109, NSC Meeting Minutes, NSC Minutes Originals 1970; Memorandum. 1970, September 22. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, RG 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Records of Thomas Moorer, Box 114, Work File (Middle East); Minutes. 1970, September 23, 9:30 am. National Security Council Meeting. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-109, NSC Meeting Minutes, NSC Minutes Originals 1970; Memorandum. 1970, September 25. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 336, Subject Files, Items to Discuss with the President, September 9-December 1970.

⁹⁷ Shlaim 2008; Memorandum. 1970, September 28. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 615, Country Files, Middle East, Jordan, Vol. V.

It was a difficult predicament. I was distressed to be fighting the Jordanians, whom we did not think of as the enemy. I didn't bring up our own much stronger air force because I wanted to prevent escalation. My feeling was that as long as we could achieve our goal of protecting the guerrillas without committing the air force, there was no need to do so.⁹⁸

Asad instead hoped to establish an area in northern Jordan to allow the Palestinians to have a position from which to negotiate with the Jordanian government. Rifaat al-Asad, who helped his brother come to power in 1970, supports this account.⁹⁹

Asad had concluded that further Syrian military advances in Jordan could trigger a conflict with the United States, and Israel's military manoeuvres also made him wary of becoming involved in a situation that could lead to another military conflict with Israel when Syria's military was still recovering from the 1967 conflict. Asad even supported keeping the Syrian role in the conflict covert, but President Atassi's public comments indicated to Jordan that Syria was considering further military action, when in reality Asad had no such plans.¹⁰⁰

Asad's decision to not engage the air force to protect the Palestinians when the Jordanian military launched the counter-offensive in the north resulted in criticism from the PLO and senior members of the Ba'th Party. Asad defended his actions in September 1970, arguing that he did not want to completely destroy relations with Jordan and weaken Jordan's military, which would be needed in the future to fight Israel.¹⁰¹

During the October 1970 Ba'th Party congress, Asad urged the Ba'th leadership to focus on building stronger relations with its Arab neighbours and the Soviet Union instead of engaging in brinkmanship with Jordan on behalf of the Palestinians, which could lead Syria into another war in Israel. Asad believed that Syria needed time to improve its military before confronting Israel. Jadid opposed this position, believing that the Palestinian struggle should take precedence. President Atassi sided with Jadid and voted against Asad's proposal on re-orientating Syria's foreign policy. Sensing this lost vote as an opportunity to his bitter rival, Jadid used his stronger voting share in the Ba'th Party to remove Asad from command of Syrian forces. Because Asad controlled the military and the elite units in the state were headed by his brother, Rifaat al-Asad, this vote was largely symbolic. Tired of the divisive

⁹⁸ Seale, Patrick. *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988), pp. 158–159.

⁹⁹ Interview with Rifaat al-Asad, August 2012, Paris.

¹⁰⁰ Talhami 2001, Ch. 4; Seale 1988, Ch. 9.

¹⁰¹ Talhami 2001, Ch. 4.

radical politics and this infighting, Asad responded by moving to oust Atassi, Jadid and their allies from power, moving to seize the Syrian Presidency in November 1970.¹⁰²

4.14. Misperceiving a Crisis

While President Nixon succeeded in securing King Hussein's rule of Jordan, throughout the crisis the United States, as the diplomatic record has shown, had very little knowledge of Syrian decision-making. In discussions held in the White House, Syria's actions were largely defined in the context of the Soviet Union. American strategy was made without any formal diplomatic overture to Damascus. Relying on Israeli intelligence, assessments from the Jordanian government, and diplomatic contacts in Egypt, Nixon came to see Syria as a state with Soviet backing that sought to overthrow the Hashemite monarchy and install a pro-Soviet Palestinian state in Jordan. Even though there was some recognition that Syria itself might have been acting independently from the Soviet Union, Syria's intentions became inflated into an international context, instead of being seen primarily in their regional context. Equally, the Nixon Administration saw the Syrians' actions as an attempt to derail the peace process and endanger Israel's security.¹⁰³

This crisis serves in many regards as a case study of Nixon and Kissinger's wider strategy upon entering office in 1969. Viewing the crisis in Jordan in the context of how it impacted their defined wider conceptions of America's national interest and identity, Nixon sought to prevent the Soviet Union from expanding its position in the Middle East, and at the same time to shore up a regional ally who shared America's interests in the region. Recognizing the fiscally constrained position the United States was in, Nixon and Kissinger relied on a limited American military footprint in the Mediterranean to act as a psychological deterrent. Linking the psychological deterrent to Kissinger's negotiations with the Soviet Union, Nixon hoped that such action would effectively convince Moscow to dissuade the Syrians from expanding their intervention. The White House also hoped that engaging Egypt in an effort to secure their support for the withdrawal of Syrian forces would put pressure on Moscow to bring an end to the Syrians' actions.

When it became clear that such action alone was insufficient, Kissinger sought Israeli support for militarily shoring up King Hussein. Underscoring the importance of Israel's support throughout the crisis, in a conversation with Golda Meir Kissinger stressed, "The

¹⁰² Talhami, Ch. 4; Seale 1988, Ch. 9.

¹⁰³ Memorandum. 1970, September 16. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 615, Country Files, Middle East, Jordan, Vol. V. Top.

President will never forget Israel's role in preventing the deterioration in Jordan and blocking the attempt to overturn the regime there. He said that the United States is fortunate in having an ally like Israel in the Middle East. These events will be taken into account in all future developments."¹⁰⁴ In Nixon and Kissinger's assessment, their employment of allies in the region to advance American interests, which allowed the US to avoid becoming over-extended in regional conflicts as they directly engaged the larger systemic challenges facing the United States, succeeded. Arguably, unlike presidents Kennedy and Johnson, whose conception of American interests and identity led them to escalate their involvement in the civil conflict in Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger, responding to one of their own allies' civil conflicts, chose to engage this crisis with pragmatism and measured restraint.

However, Nixon and Kissinger's strategy also had its limits, namely in that it neglected the importance of the regional dynamics at play in the crisis. In seeing the conflict in terms of their wider interests with regards to the Soviet Union, Nixon and Kissinger overestimated the agency of international actors in the conflict and diminished the agency of regional actors as independent actors.

Despite Nixon and Kissinger perceiving the Soviet Union as having an important role in this conflict, Seale's interview with Hafiz al-Asad shows that the Soviet Union did more to constrain Asad's actions in Jordan than to support them and, arguably, was closer to the US position on supporting the survival of the Jordanian monarchy than Nixon and Kissinger perceived. Nixon and Kissinger's attribution of Israel's important role in securing Jordan's future was also misperceived. By not understanding the Syrian position, the US failed to see the limited objectives Hafiz al-Asad had in the civil war, and thus they gave more agency to Israel than was warranted.¹⁰⁵

4.15. 1970's Impact on the Region

In Asad and Nixon's first encounter, the identity and interests of both states precluded cooperation. In the US's estimation, Syria was a client of the Soviet Union whose perceived radical politics after 1967 had obstructed any opportunity for cooperation and engagement. Containment represented the best strategy for limiting Syria's potential destabilizing role in the region. For Syria, the US was seen as a state completely inimical to its interests. In an interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam, a senior political leader in the Ba'th Party in the 1970s, he argued that Syrian public opinion was decisively turned against the United States

¹⁰⁴ Rabin, Yitzhak *The Rabin Memoirs* (London: 1979), p. 148.

¹⁰⁵ Seale 1988, Ch. 11.

after the 1967 war and would have precluded any direct cooperation between the United States and Syria.¹⁰⁶

The US's reliance on Israel and King Hussein's success in repelling the Syrian intervention supported Nixon and Kissinger's assessment that they could successfully contain the Soviet Union's satellite states in the region without engaging them. However, the UAR's willingness to act as a mediator in Jordan in 1970 led Nixon and Kissinger to consider whether to further engage Cairo in the future.

The unsettled peace agreement after 1967, further compounded by the events in Jordan in 1970, would eventually boil over in 1973 and lead to a regional war between Israel and its neighbours.¹⁰⁷ The forced exile of the Palestinian militant community from Jordan to Lebanon in 1971 consequently led to the civil war in Lebanon in 1975, another situation where the Palestinian militant community would force Asad to intervene in a neighbour's affairs. Reflecting on the crises in Lebanon and Jordan, Hafiz al-Asad noted:

Never in my life have I been for anarchy nor will I ever be. Anarchy leads only to suffering and never reaps results. I would have wished the Palestinian resistance to remain pure and free from involvement in the internal affairs of Arab states. But while I opposed Palestinian anarchy in Jordan and in Lebanon, I also believed in the Palestinians' right to find a suitable base from which to conduct their struggle — whether from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, or any other place. That was my opinion from the very beginning and it remains so today.¹⁰⁸

These words capture the dilemma of 1970 for Syria and Hafiz al-Asad. In contrast to the US's opposition to Syrian intervention in 1970, Nixon would choose to back Syria's intervention in Lebanon in 1976.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam, August 2012, Paris.

¹⁰⁷ Seale 1988, Ch. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Seale 1988, p. 157.

CHAPTER 5

THE GOLAN NEGOTIATIONS

US–SYRIAN RELATIONS AND THE ARAB–ISRAELI CONFLICT

American–Syrian relations underwent a transformation from enmity to a brief period of cooperation and normalized relations after the October War of 1973. While the crisis of 1970 ruptured the stability of the post-1967 status quo and brought these two states indirectly in to conflict, it did not produce a re-assessment by either state of the value of engaging one another. It instead sustained both states' policies of relying on other regional and international partners to advance their security interests.

As noted extensively in alliance literature, states enter alliances to defensively balance against threats in the international system. Great power–small state relations inevitably make this balance very one-sided or limited. Alliance formation in the case of the United States and Syria during this period can be viewed in its most basic essence: security cooperation. This chapter seeks to examine the relative weight of identity and interests in driving their alliance behaviour and their decisions towards one another during these disengagement agreements.

The US's diplomatic opening with Syria in 1974 created a limited window for substantial security cooperation between these states. This chapter examines why security cooperation between the two states fell apart by 1975 on the framework for the Arab–Israeli peace negotiations, with the failure to secure a second disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights. Examining the role of identity and interests in their negotiations, this chapter argues that while both states had strategic interests that they could engage one another on, their contrasting identities hindered their ability to cooperate and to secure their respective interests in the region.

This chapter first examines the impact of the October War of 1973 on the United States' and Syria's policies on the Arab–Israeli conflict. It then examines the negotiations on securing a disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights in 1974 and the subsequent normalization of relations between the United States and Syria. Finally, it examines why a second disengagement agreement failed, and the resulting impact on their relations.

5.1. A Broken Security Architecture

The post-1967 political order in the Middle East was tested in both Egypt's war of attrition against Israel up to 1970 and in the Jordan Crisis of 1970, but was further unsettled with the shift in Arab politics under the leaderships of Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt and Hafiz al-Asad of Syria. Both Sadat and Asad, men from military backgrounds whose training and experiences were forged in the post-colonial experience in the modern Middle East, sought to reposition their states after the tumultuous politics of the 1960s and pursue their states' interests in the Middle East with more pragmatism.

In Nixon and Kissinger's calculation the regional security architecture, albeit stressed by Jordan in 1970, was mostly stable, even if it was not ideal. Nixon was aware that a dual tension existed between the domestic and strategic contingencies of supporting Israel and the need to build stronger relations with the Arab world.¹ Despite Kissinger's own discomfort with secretary of state William Rogers' first-term engagement in peace initiatives, Nixon supported Rogers' efforts to secure a settlement with Israel and its neighbours along the lines of UN Security Council Resolution 242.² Kissinger expressed concern that Rogers' initiative, which focused on securing a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict at an international conference, was counterproductive to American interests and Israel's security. Kissinger believed that step-by-step diplomacy would allow the United States to both have conceptual control over the process and exclude the Soviet Union. Despite Rogers' efforts, his initiatives failed to secure a comprehensive agreement.³

After the crisis of 1970 and the expulsion of Soviet advisors from Egypt in July 1972, Nixon entrusted Kissinger with the management of the US's Middle East policy, at the exclusion of William Rogers. Bypassing the State Department through back-channel communication between the White House and governments in the region, Kissinger launched an engagement primarily focused on Egypt and Jordan. The positive reception Kissinger received from Sadat raised Nixon's hopes that a potential breakthrough with Egypt could lead to a wider peace settlement and remove the Soviet Union from the Arab-Israeli conflict. These secret negotiations failed to produce a successful outcome, with Israel refusing to make concessions on the Sinai. Kissinger concluded that any successful negotiations on the Sinai could not be undertaken seriously until after the Israeli elections in October 1973.⁴ With diplomacy not producing any substantive results, Sadat secretly began to plan war with

¹ Kissinger, Henry A. *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), pp. 562–564

² Nixon, Richard M. *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978). p. 479; Text of Roger's Plan: www.brookings.edu/press/appendix/peace_process.htm

³ Kissinger 1979, pp. 372, 1278–80.

⁴ Kissinger 1979, pp. 1276, 1285, 1280–1289.

Israel. Aware of Egypt's threatening rhetoric against Israel, the US had warned the Israeli leadership of a potential attack in the spring of 1974 by Egypt, but Egypt chose not to go forward with such an attack.⁵ When Egypt and Syria launched their attack on Israel in October 1973, the United States was caught completely off guard.⁶

5.1.1. Nixon and Kissinger's New Approach: New Circumstances, Old Strategy, New Tactics

The October War shattered the US's assumptions about the durability of the regional order. New conditions emerged which raised the urgency for Nixon and Kissinger to take more proactive role.⁷ First, the war brought détente to a boiling point, with the United States going to its highest state of nuclear alert since the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Soviet Union threatening to intervene in Egypt.⁸ Even though neither state had any substantial advance warning, both superpowers believed that the other had a hand in planning the war.⁹ In an effort to bring an end to the conflict with Soviet backing, Nixon and Kissinger sponsored joint UN Resolution 338 with Moscow, which committed both superpowers to work for a settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict. This resolution gave the Soviet Union a seat at the post-war negotiating table. Moscow pushed for the resolution to support the pre-1967 borders as the basis for future negotiations, but Kissinger successfully manoeuvred to remove this exact wording from the document.¹⁰

⁵ Kissinger, Henry A. *Years of Upheaval*, reprint edition. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), pp. 226–227.

⁶ Kissinger, Henry A. *Crisis: An Anatomy of Two Major Foreign Policy Crises* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁷ Memorandum. From Harold H. Saunders of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft). 1973, November 23. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 664, Country Files, Middle East, Middle East War, Memos & Misc., Oct. 18, 1973, Vol. II.

⁸ Kissinger 1999, pp. 580–581.

⁹ Message. Message From Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev to President Nixon. National Archives. 1973, October 12–November 21. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 69, Country Files, Europe, USSR, Dobrynin/Kissinger, Vol. 20, October 12–November 21, 1973; Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, October 17, 4 p.m. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H–92, Meeting Files, WSAG Meetings, Middle East, 10/17/73 [1 of 2]; Minutes. Minutes of Cabinet Meeting. 1973, October 18. Ford Library, NSA Memcon, Box 2.

¹⁰ Message. Message From President Nixon to Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev. 1973, October 18. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 70, Country Files, Europe, USSR, Exchange of Notes Between Dobrynin & Kissinger, Vol. 7; Telephone Conversation. 1973, October 19, 7:09 PM. Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Kissinger and the Soviet Ambassador (Dobrynin). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Transcripts (Telcons), Chronological File, Box 23; Telephone Conversation. 1973, October 23, 11:25 am. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Kissinger and the Minister of the Soviet Embassy (Vorontsov). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, Kissinger Telephone Conversations, Transcripts (Telcons),

Second, America's relations with Israel strengthened during the war even though Nixon was profoundly distrustful of Israel and its motives. The surprise attack by Egypt and Syria along both of Israel's fronts shattered the American assumption that the balance of power in the region deterred aggression by Egypt and Syria.¹¹ Caught by surprise, Israel initially suffered significant losses — well beyond the American estimates of a potential war between Israel and its neighbours.¹² The United States' air lifting of military supplies to Israel at the height of the war underscored how, despite Israel's victories in 1948 and 1967, the latter victory was not a permanent one.¹³ Even though Israel reclaimed its territorial losses, this strategic vulnerability raised the costs of instability in the region.

Third, the oil embargo led by Saudi Arabia and OPEC in response to America's material support to Israel introduced significant economic pressures on the United States and marked the first time the Arab world challenged the United States with its own means and on its own terms. King Faisal of Saudi Arabia decided to impose this embargo when the US militarily re-supplied Israel at the height of the war on the 19th of October, helping Israel reverse its initial territorial losses. The refusal by OPEC to lift this embargo until agreements were brokered between Israel and its neighbours created new urgency for the United States to address the region's broken security architecture.¹⁴ Finally, with the Watergate scandal worsening by the day, Nixon considered foreign policy the one area of his presidency where

Anatoli[y] Dobrynin File, Box 28; Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, October 21 noon-4 p.m. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 76, Country Files, Europe, USSR, Kissinger Trip to Moscow, Tel Aviv & London, October 20–22, 1973. ; Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, October 21. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 136, Country Files, Middle East, Dinitz, June 4–October 31, 1973; Telegram. 1973, October 21. From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to Secretary of State Kissinger. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 39, Kissinger Trip Files, HAK Trip—Moscow, Tel Aviv, London, TOHAK 1–60.

¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, February 8, 4:20-5:40 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 1, Nodis Memcons, September–December, Folder 3; Telegram. 1973, October 23. From Secretary of State Kissinger to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 39, Kissinger Trip Files, HAK Trip—Moscow, Tel Aviv, London, HAKTO, SECTO, TOSEC, Misc., Oct. 20–23, 1973.

¹² Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, October 10, 9:05-10:36 a.m. Ford Library, NSA Memcon, Box 2.

¹³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, October 9, 6:10-6:35 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970–73, POL ISR–US; Telegram. 1973, October 21. From Secretary of State Kissinger to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 39, Kissinger Trip Files, HAK Trip—Moscow, Tel Aviv, London, HAKTO, SECTO, TOSEC, Misc., Oct. 20–23, 1973.

¹⁴ Kissinger 1999, p. 873; Telegram. 1973, October 18. No. 3790. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1175, Harold H. Saunders Files, Middle East Negotiations Files, 1973 Middle East War; Paper. 1973, October 19. Central Intelligence Agency, DI/OER Files, Job 80–T01315A, Box 36, Folder 2; Memorandum. 1973, November 3. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 139, Country Files, Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Nov/Dec 1973.

he could underline the importance of his administration to the American public and create a legacy.¹⁵

Addressing this changing regional environment, on the 20th of October 1973, in a telegram to Kissinger President Nixon stressed, “I believe that, beyond a doubt, we are now facing the best opportunity we have had in 15 years to build a lasting peace in the Middle East. I am convinced that history will hold us responsible if we let this opportunity slip by.”¹⁶ Outlining the reasons for why the peace initiatives failed during his first term, Nixon included: “A) The intransigence of the Israelis; B) The unwillingness of the Arabs to engage themselves in discussions on a realistic basis; [and] C) Our preoccupation with other initiatives, preventing us from devoting the time required to the issue.”

Instructing Kissinger to make this diplomatic initiative his predominant focus as secretary of state, Nixon said, “I now consider a permanent Middle East settlement to be the most important goal to which we must devote ourselves.” Acknowledging the salient role of identity in America’s foreign policy, he stressed, “U.S. political considerations will absolutely have no, repeat no, influence whatever on our discussions in this regard. I want you to know that I am prepared to pressure the Israelis to the extent required, regardless of the political consequences.”¹⁷

The urgency to secure a peace settlement created a rare space for Nixon and Kissinger to consider engaging Syria, a state they had previously sought to contain during the Jordanian Crisis of 1970. As Kissinger writes in his memoirs, *A Year of Upheaval*:

Syria’s image was so forbidding that reality could not possibly match what I had been told before our arrival. Syria had distinguished itself as one of the most intransigent of Arab regimes. It was surely the most militant of the so-called confrontation states. . . . Since independence in 1946, Syria’s history had been one of violence, radical changes, and a succession of coup d’états reflecting the tensions within Syrian society and the pressures of Arab politics and ideologies.

Noting the historical significance of engaging Hafiz al-Asad, Syria’s new leader, “In international forums, like the United Nations, Syria was known to us as a friend of the Soviet Union and one of the leaders of the radical group.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Telegram. 1973, October 22. From the White House Chief of Staff (Haig) to Secretary of State Kissinger in Tel Aviv. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 39, Kissinger Trip Files, HAK Trip—Moscow, Tel Aviv, London, TOHAK 61–123, Oct. 20–23, 1973.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kissinger 1999, p. 777.

5.1.2. Hafiz al-Asad's War

As Nixon and Kissinger were grappling with peace initiatives with Egypt and Jordan at the start of the 1970s, Hafiz al-Asad, consolidating his rule in Syria, deeply believed that his first priority should be changing the balance of power in the region in his state's favour and allowing the Arab world to regain its standing after the humiliation of 1967. In his estimation, the loss of the Golan in 1967 was a blemish on Syria's honour and redressing this loss became a deep obsession for him. Asad also was concerned about Israel's occupation of Syria's territory abutting Lake Tiberius and Israel's refusal to recognize Syria's water rights in relation to the lake.¹⁹ The Syrian president was keenly aware that his position within the state and his legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people rested to a large degree on how he engaged Israel. He felt that his stature, both in the wider Arab world and with Syria's main ally, the Soviet Union, could also be strengthened if he could assert himself as an effective leader in the Arab world.²⁰

Unlike King Hussein and Anwar al-Sadat, who viewed their countries' future primarily through brokered engagement with Israel, Asad, a fervent Arab nationalist, believed the future was a struggle for the preservation of the Arab people, and that negotiations with Israel, a country he profoundly distrusted and rejected, would not lead to concessions, but only to more weakness. Only war, even if all territory was not recovered, could allow Syria to engage Israel on more equitable terms.²¹ As Patrick Seale observes, "This grim assessment that war was a necessity was peculiarly Syrian, stemming from the frustrations of twenty years of border tussles with Israel, from Syria's passionate attachment to the Palestine cause and more generally, from the perception that Syria and Israel, face to face and competing for primacy in the Levant, were doomed to be antagonists."²²

In Asad's estimation, the security architecture of the region after June 1967 allowed Israel to dictate the terms of engagement with its neighbours more so than the Arab states, which he viewed Syria as the natural centre and potential leader of. Asad objected specifically to UN Security Council Resolution 242, which Sadat and Hussein were prepared to engage on, because, in his estimation, it guaranteed the "liquidation of the Palestine question."²³ Asad deeply distrusted the United States' negotiating role in these talks. As Seale recounts, "Like

¹⁹ Interview with Richard Murphy, New York, July 2013.

²⁰ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad, Paris, August 2012; Seale, Patrick. *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988), p. 185–201.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Seale 1988, p. 185.

²³ Seale 1988, p. 185.

many Syrians he viewed the United States with mistrust, even with animosity. No one in his entourage understood how the Arab case might be put to the West, nor how the Western public opinion and governments might be won over.”²⁴

Unaware of Sadat’s secret negotiations with the United States, Asad found the Egyptian leader to be an amenable partner for planning a war against Israel. Sadat shared Asad’s conclusions that negotiating from a position of strength instead of weakness advanced Egyptian interests more than the slow tempo of negotiations brokered by the United States. By 1972, planning for the war began in earnest, importantly keeping plans for the war secret from both the Soviet Union and the United States.²⁵

In a conversation with Patrick Seale, Asad recounted the agreed-upon Syrian–Egyptian strategy for the war:

The goal was the retrieval of territory which Israel occupied in 1967. Each country was free to plan its offensive on its own front, but it was agreed that Syria’s aim was the recovery of the Golan while the Egyptian objective was to reach Sinai passes in the first stage before regrouping for the reconquest of the whole peninsula. This was what Sadat and I decided and it was on this principle that we went to war.²⁶

However, Sadat deceived Asad. Sadat instructed his generals to pursue a military campaign whose sole goal was to capture the ten-mile zone east of the Suez Canal. Showing Asad fake military plans that would support their agreed strategy, Asad and his inner circle believed that he and Sadat were fighting a war with similar goals.²⁷ Launching their offensive on the 6th of October 1973, Egypt and Syria made initial gains, with Asad believing that as he attempted to advance in the Golan Heights, Sadat would cross the Suez. The Egyptian army would first halt ten miles east of the Suez line to give time to resupply, and then advance to the Israeli border to give Asad time to capture the Golan Heights.²⁸

Instead of continuing to advance on the Sinai, Egypt fortified its position ten miles in and did not advance, allowing Israel to refocus its attention on the Syrian front by the 8th of October. In conversations with Yevgeny Primakov, one of the principle advisors to the Soviet leadership on the Middle East, Asad noted, “We would have been able to hold out against the onslaught — even at the expense of losing territory — if the Egyptian advance had been followed through, which would have forced the Israelis to redeploy their troops to

²⁴ Seale 1988, p. 188.

²⁵ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad.

²⁶ Seale 1988, p. 197.

²⁷ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

²⁸ Seale 1988, Ch. 14; Fahmy, Ismail. *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East: An Arab View* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam, Rifaat al-Asad, and Richard Murphy.

the western front. But that is not what happened, and that is why Syrian troops bore the brunt of the Israeli offensive.’²⁹

Fighting the war on his own, Asad’s forward push into the Golan was reversed by the end of the 9th of October. Expanding their offensive against Syrian targets, the Israeli military struck at core civilian and military infrastructure and advanced to within twenty miles of Damascus by the 11th of October. Asad, who at the time still did not fully recognize Sadat’s betrayal, requested Egyptian support, but Sadat ignored those requests. Unaware of Sadat’s communications with the United States throughout the war, Egypt’s acceptance of the US–Soviet ceasefire further angered Asad, who had yet to concede defeat and was even considering a further offensive at the time. But, by the 23rd of October, after meeting with his Ba’th leadership and his military, Asad reluctantly accepted the ceasefire. At the cost of \$3.5 billion and with 6,000 men killed, Asad’s offensive failed in meeting his objective of recapturing the Golan.³⁰

Recounting to Primakov his intentions for the war, Asad noted, “We in Syria were aware that at the end of the war there had to be a political settlement built around UN Security Council resolutions. However, our plans were based on the assumption that by the time the UN intervened, we would have managed to liberate territory on both fronts that had been occupied by Israel in 1967.”³¹ Hafiz al-Asad was then placed in a difficult quandary. With Egypt’s betrayal, the only significant bargaining chips he had left were the support of King Faisal’s oil embargo, his capture of Israeli POWs, and his ability to potentially spoil other peace initiatives with the absence of a disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel. Asad entered the post-1973 war environment with significantly less leverage than he originally intended. These circumstances made Asad more amenable to engaging the United States.

5.1.3. New Perceptions and New Alliances

On the 13th of December 1973, Henry Kissinger landed in Algiers to meet with Houari Boumediene, the president of Algeria and a close friend of Hafiz al-Asad. Boumediene stressed to Kissinger his view that the US and the Soviet Union were attempting to force a settlement on the Arab world. Kissinger responded to the Algerian president:

We don’t want a Russian–American peace either, but we work with the Soviet Union because it is the only way to influence their actions. But we don’t have the same

²⁹ Primakov, Yevgeny. *Russia and the Arabs* (New York: Basic Books 2009), p. 150.

³⁰ Seale 1988, Ch. 14; Conversation with Asad in Primakov 2009, p. 150–152.

³¹ Primakov 2009, p. 150.

objectives. . . . I told President Sadat, so I will tell you the same thing: We don't need a recognized preferred position in Egypt, Algeria, or anywhere. We can afford to rely on the proposition that a nationalist Arab who wishes to improve the well-being of his own people will have many reasons for good relations with the United States.³²

Arriving in Damascus for the first meeting of a US secretary of state with the president of Syria since John Foster Dulles on the 15th of December 1973, Kissinger noted to Asad, "This is the first high level contact between our two countries in years." Hafiz al-Asad curtly rejoined: "The U.S. is responsible for all of this." This short exchange marked the beginning of hours-long negotiations between the two men and underscored how wide a gap in both identity and interests divided these two nations.³³

In his first meeting with Kissinger, Hafiz al-Asad articulated a number of observations on Syria's relations with the United States with the intention that these would be the basis of their new engagement. Opening this new period of engagement, Asad stressed, "We are not and never were against the people of the United States. I have said this many times and in many places. There is much convincing evidence that we have to be against US policy because it is against Syrian interests and just aspirations." Underscoring the relationship between the United States and Israel, Syria's principal enemy, Asad noted, "Had it not been for US assistance in support of Israel, Israel could not remain in occupation and force out the Palestinians from their lands since 1948 but we are not against the United States as a country or a people."³⁴

In meetings with Kissinger, Asad seemed unable to separate Israeli and American policy from one another. He raised the example of the Suez Crisis of 1956, where President Eisenhower forced Israel and Britain to withdraw from Egypt. Asad believed that situation showed that the United States could exercise authority in forcing a disengagement agreement if Washington so wished. Kissinger countered by arguing that the circumstances had become more complex since then, but Asad was not convinced. This conceptual gap between the US's perceived capability and action was one that Kissinger never was able to overcome with Asad.³⁵

³² Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, December 13, 11:20-1:15 p.m. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1027, Presidential/HAK Memcons, Memcons, HAK & Presidential, December 1973 [2 of 2].

³³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, December 15. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1027, Presidential/HAK Memcons, Memcons, HAK & Presidential, December 1973, [1 of 2].

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, February 27. National Archives, Box 1028, Presidential/HAK Memcons, January 1–February 28, 1974, Folder 1; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 27. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 21, Classified

Addressing his relations with the Soviet Union, Asad stressed, “Our policy is decided in light of our national interests. We want to build our line in a completely independent way. Syria is non-aligned.” Noting Syria’s close relations militarily and politically with the Soviet Union, Kissinger responded, “The Soviets should not feel your talking with the US makes you anymore dependent on the US than arms purchases makes you dependent on the Soviet Union.” Abdul Halim Khaddam, Syria’s foreign minister, rejoined to Kissinger, “The matter is not looked at through the eyes of the big powers. We see the matters through the eyes of our own interests. It is important that the big powers recognize the interests of the local nations.”³⁶

While Asad’s relations with the Soviet Union were not as extensive as America’s relations with Israel in terms of material and political support, looking back at this period of Syria’s relations, Khaddam repeatedly stressed that relations with the United States were never seen as replacing Damascus’ relations with the Soviet Union, which were both deep and materially essential to Syria’s strategic parity with Israel and their position in the region. Generations of Syrians either studied or were trained in Moscow, including Rifaat al-Asad, the younger brother of Hafiz, senior member of the Ba’th Party, and head of Asad’s elite military forces, who received his doctorate in Moscow. In addition, the relationship aligned more with the ruling Ba’th party’s ideology. The loss of Egypt to the United States after 1973 allowed Hafiz al-Asad to better negotiate the terms of his Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union.³⁷

In his meetings with the Syrian president, Kissinger came to see Asad as a leader who was more independent from Moscow than he had originally estimated.³⁸ In a conversation in Damascus, Asad raised the Jordanian Crisis of 1970. Kissinger noted that he perceived Syria’s actions in the crisis in Jordan to be in line with his perception that their actions were being taken on behalf of the Soviet Union’s interests in the Middle East. Asad countered that his decision to intervene in Jordan was separate from any decision of the Soviet Union. Kissinger raised the role of Soviet military advisors during the conflict. Asad stressed that Moscow had no advance knowledge of Damascus’ decision to intervene. Asad’s willingness to act independently from the Soviet Union and, at times, to keep them at arms’ length from

External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 2; Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, June 11. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 11, Nodis Memcons, June 1975, Folder 2; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 27. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 21, Classified External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad.

³⁸ Kissinger 1999, p. 781.

his negotiations with the United States reflected Asad's pragmatic pursuit of Syria's interests above and beyond the demands and requirements of his allies.³⁹

Finally, breaking with Syria's rejectionist policies towards Israel, a core component of Syrian foreign policy since 1948, Asad said, "We in this area want to realize a just peace. We are serious. We want to build our own country. We need a just peace." Interlinked with a "just peace" was the status of the Palestinians. Asad stressed: "There can be no peace with justice unless the Arab Palestinian question is settled. The Arab people of Palestine were driven out by force and are now living in camps. How can there be peace without settling their problem?"⁴⁰

In his cables to Washington, Kissinger noted that Syria's identity was more interlinked with its Arab identity than Egypt's was; the latter state was willing to pursue peace on its own terms without the Palestinians, in Kissinger's estimation.⁴¹ For Asad, his state's Arab identity could not be discounted. Asad emphasized the constraints of this identity on Syria's pursuit of its strategic interests: "We find our policy reflects the hopes and aspirations of our own people. They support it. Otherwise we would face a number of difficulties."⁴²

Responding to Asad's concerns about the US's relationship with Israel, Kissinger presented Asad with a candid assessment of the future of the peace talks and America's support for Israel:

There would be no chance of a peaceful solution without Syrian and Egyptian effort on the battlefield. As result, objective conditions to make progress to peace are better than they have been. There is a good possibility to bring peace. I can't be certain, I don't want to mislead you. We will make a major effort. We have succeeded in a number of fields. Many countries can write the exact conditions they favor. They don't have to implement them. We are the only country that can bring about political progress without war. You are right in pointing out we have supported Israel. That is true.⁴³

Also acknowledging the constraints America's identity has had on the pursuit of the Nixon Administration's Middle East peace negotiations, Kissinger stressed:

³⁹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, March 1, 7:30-11:30 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 4, Nodis Memcons, January 1974, Folder 4.

⁴⁰ Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, December 13, 11:20-1:15 p.m. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1027, Presidential/HAK Memcons, Memcons, HAK & Presidential, December 1973 [2 of 2].

⁴¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 29, 2:45-3:45 a.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 8, Nodis Memcons, May 1974, Folder 10.

⁴² Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, December 13, 11:20-1:15 p.m. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1027, Presidential/HAK Memcons, Memcons, HAK & Presidential, December 1973 [2 of 2].

⁴³ Ibid.

Candidly, there are strong domestic pressures in the US in favor of support of Israel. We have to manage our domestic situation if we are to be helpful. Don't put us in a position where we have to take final positions, when what is required is first steps. People say if you can't get Israel to go back to the October 22 positions, you can't do anything. If I had been stupid, I could have achieved this.

That's not a problem. For me to waste capital, to waste ammunition on this would not make sense, what is a few kilometers?⁴⁴

In order to counter these domestic pressures and try to pursue America's national interests in this challenging context, Kissinger urged Asad to have patience:

Pressure on Israel must be for a bigger withdrawal. Israeli strategy is to get me to get them to say exactly where Israel is going, then all media and groups will start agitating against me, or they will start a fight on small issues. Next time when I ask for something bigger they could accuse me of being anti-Israeli. That's why there has been no fight over the October 22 positions. We need time to organize ourselves domestically. We have made progress in organizing ourselves at home. I have spent much time with Congress.⁴⁵

As a first step toward establishing stronger relations, at their first meeting Asad and Kissinger agreed to establish Interest Sections in both of their countries to begin to broker dialogue.⁴⁶

5.2. Syria's Refusal to go to Geneva

Washington and Moscow agreed that with a cease-fire agreement signed, a peace conference to be held in Geneva involving all parties was the best path to secure a peace settlement in the region. Nixon and Kissinger understood that the Soviet premier, Leonid Brezhnev, had secured Asad's participation in the conference. In addition to opening this chapter for engagement, Kissinger's first visit to Damascus was intended to confirm President Asad's participation in the conference. Surprising Kissinger, Asad stated that he had not yet decided whether or not to attend the conference.⁴⁷

Hoping to convince Asad that he should attend, Kissinger attempted to pique Asad's interests by discussing the format and agenda of the proposed conference. To Kissinger's

⁴⁴ Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, December 13, 11:20-1:15 p.m. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1027, Presidential/HAK Memcons, Memcons, HAK & Presidential, December 1973 [2 of 2].

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kissinger 1999, pp. 777-786.

surprise, Asad was willing to not have the PLO represented at the conference. Acknowledging the difficulties of inviting them in terms of American domestic politics, Kissinger noted to Asad, “Whether the Palestinians will be invited cannot be decided by a few words. If [the] Israeli propaganda machine starts in the US, Israelis will say terrorists are being given recognition.”⁴⁸

On the status of the Israeli POWs that Syria captured during the war, Asad indicated that he would be willing to discuss them if an agreement could be reached on the format for a disengagement agreement. Kissinger expressed to the president that the Soviets had assured him of Syria’s interest in returning the POWs. Rebuffing this suggestion, Asad pointedly asked, “Why should we give anything without anything in return. We are taking back our own land.” Asad further remarked, “Why give up these cards, for what? The exchange of POWs is linked to land.”⁴⁹

To move beyond Asad’s assertion that disengagement was a precondition for his participation in the conference, Kissinger suggested that, similar to Egypt, Asad could send military officers to discuss the terms of the disengagement with Israeli representatives. The Syrian president noted that he did not see any practical purpose in sending military representatives if the basic outlines of an agreement could not be agreed beforehand. Despite these obstacles, Kissinger thought he had moved enough ground to convince Asad to attend the conference. To his surprise and consternation, Asad declined to attend.⁵⁰

Asad stressed to Kissinger that, like Egypt, where a disengagement agreement was already under discussion on the Sinai, Syria should be offered a proposal before the Conference. Kissinger argued that, unlike in the case of Egypt, he would need more preparatory time to bring Israel on board with a disengagement agreement. Gauging American intentions, the president asked Kissinger where the disengagement line on Golan could be drawn. Avoiding committing Israel or the United States to a specific border, the secretary noted that he was not in a position in their first meeting to make such a proposal. Also aware that it might have hindered the negotiations under way on the Sinai, Kissinger stressed to the president that the time was not right for a disengagement agreement and that further planning was needed.

⁴⁸ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, December 13. Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1027, Presidential/HAK Memcons, Memcons, HAK & Presidential, December 1973 [2 of 2].

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Unconvinced by these arguments, Asad stated, “Israel cannot say no when the US wants them to say yes.”⁵¹

However, Asad assured Kissinger that his absence did not mean that the conference should not go forward. This commitment allowed Kissinger to organize Geneva. Nixon and Kissinger privately saw this decision as potentially beneficial because it removed the potential hurdle of Israel not attending the conference if its POWs were not returned beforehand.⁵²

5.3. Disengagement I

In his meetings with Asad in January and February 1974, the president was amenable to Kissinger’s step-by-step approach, instead of pursuing a full disengagement agreement with Israel on the first round of negotiations. With Israeli forces still occupying Syrian territory, Asad was in no position to not seek a disengagement agreement. However, for him to make such an agreement, Asad insisted that a first disengagement had to move beyond the pre-1973 war borders on the Golan Heights. Asad personally needed to show to the Syrian people that a disengagement agreement with Israel symbolically marked the beginning of Israel’s withdrawal from the Golan Heights.⁵³ The Syrian president noted in his meeting with Kissinger on the 27th of February 1974, “Citizens of our country really follow events more closely than in other countries and are very sensitive to national patriotic feelings.” Asad also said that a “just peace” needed to include a settlement of the Palestinian question, but a withdrawal on the Golan could be the first step.⁵⁴

Kissinger viewed Asad as a man who was interested in peace, but not without significant concessions; Asad’s word could be trusted, but his word came at great expense and through difficult negotiation.⁵⁵ Kissinger believed that Asad had less authority than Sadat to make decisions independently from his inner circle, because the Syrian president would repeatedly invite his senior political and military officials to join him in his negotiations with

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Kissinger 1999, pp. 777–786; Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, December 13, 11:20-1:15 p.m. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1027, Presidential/HAK Memcons, Memcons, HAK & Presidential, December 1973 [2 of 2].

⁵³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, January 20. National Archives, Box 1028, Presidential/HAK Memcons, January 1–February 28, 1974, Folder 2; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, February 27. National Archives, Box 1028, Presidential/HAK Memcons, January 1–February 28, 1974, Folder 1.

⁵⁴ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, February 27. National Archives, Box 1028, Presidential/HAK Memcons, January 1–February 28, 1974, Folder 1..

⁵⁵ Interview with Edward P. Djerejian, Houston, September 2011.

Kissinger.⁵⁶ However, both Rifaat al-Asad and Abdul Halim Khaddam, members of President Asad's inner circle, stressed that while he did engage the leadership of the Ba'ath party and his senior military and intelligence officers, all decisions were ultimately made by him.⁵⁷

Kissinger's success at reaching a disengagement agreement between Egypt and Israel in March 1974 allowed Nixon and Kissinger to focus on securing a disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria. While Asad condemned Sadat's decision to sign a disengagement on the Sinai before the status of the Golan was settled, Asad did very little to undermine the signing of the agreement. However, after the signing of the agreement, he tactically escalated the cross-border shelling on the Golan against Israeli positions to increase pressure on Israel to make concessions. Asad also threatened to break the ceasefire agreement that ended the October War.⁵⁸ Nixon and Kissinger worried this environment could escalate to actual war, drawing both Egypt and Syria back into conflict with Israel and potentially leading to Soviet intervention in the region.⁵⁹

Kissinger faced significant opposition from Israeli prime minister Golda Meir on making any agreements that would go beyond returning to the pre-1973 war status quo. From the Israeli leadership's perspective, unlike the Sinai where Egyptian troops were still on the peninsula, the Israelis had driven the Syrians back to 20 miles from Damascus. Meir did not believe that the tenuous position Asad was in justified any substantial concessions. Meir also was concerned about making concessions to Syria that would be seen as rewarding its neighbour for belligerency.⁶⁰ The status of the Israeli POWs, a deep concern of the Israeli leadership, was Asad's principle leverage point. In Kissinger's meetings with Asad in February, the president agreed to allow the Red Cross to visit the prisoners and said that a list of these prisoners would be given to the Israeli leadership. He insisted, however, that the complete release of these prisoners would only occur once an agreement was reached.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Kissinger 1999, Ch. XXI.

⁵⁷ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad.

⁵⁸ Seale 1988, Ch. 15.

⁵⁹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, February 8, 4:20-5:40 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 1, Nodis Memcons, September-December, Folder 3; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, March 1, noon-1 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 7, Nodis Memcons, March 1974, Folder 7.

⁶⁰ Memorandum of Conversation. 1973, December 16, 9:30 p.m.- 12:42 a.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-1977, Box 2, NODIS Action Memos 1973-1976.

⁶¹ Telegram. 1974, February 5. From the Department of State to the U.S. Interests Section in Syria. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1181, Harold H. Saunders Files, Middle East Peace Negotiations, February 1-8, 1974; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, February 27. National Archives, Box 1028, Presidential/HAK Memcons, January 1-February 28, 1974, Folder 1.

The Israeli leadership hoped they could secure this agreement with very few concessions. Nixon and Kissinger were not in the best position to move Israel from its current position. In Washington, President Nixon was hemorrhaging political capital and authority by the day as a result of Watergate.⁶² Nixon and Kissinger also had to keep Israel on board for a potential second disengagement with Egypt, which in their estimation, had better chances of concluding an overall peace agreement with Israel.⁶³ Deciding to expend limited political capital, Nixon announced that \$2.2 billion in military assistance to Israel would be given as credit, not as it was originally envisaged as pure aid. Nixon could then decide, on the 1st of July 1974, whether or not he would require a repayment of \$1.5 billion of that \$2.2 billion dollars. Nixon hoped that this incentive could move Meir and her successor, Yitzhak Rabin, towards the US's position.⁶⁴

Kissinger also sought to change the conditions in the Arab world to weaken Asad's negotiating position and make him more amenable to any compromises the US secretary of state was able to broker. With much diplomatic success, Kissinger convinced King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and OPEC states to "provisionally" lift the oil embargo on the 18th of March 1974. This removed from Asad one of the few points of leverage he had with the United States. Kissinger also encouraged Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria, which all had good relations with Asad, to convince the Syrian president to be flexible if negotiations between Israel and Syria could be started.⁶⁵

On the 14th and 15th of March 1974, Kissinger met with the Israeli leadership to try to move forward with a partial disengagement agreement on the Golan. He urged them to consider returning Quneitra, a town beyond the 6th of October line, the line on the Golan that Israel held before the October War.⁶⁶ For Asad, this town represented a symbolic territorial gain he could present to his people. However, Kissinger assured Israel that he would not press for the removal of any of the Israeli settlements that been constructed on the Golan since 1967.⁶⁷

Aware of the potential strain such agreements could have on the US's wider relations with the Soviet Union and the influence Moscow had on Syria, Kissinger travelled to Moscow to meet with Leonid Brezhnev on the 26th of March 1974 to gauge Moscow's position on the

⁶² Interview with Edward P. Djerejian.

⁶³ Kissinger 1999, Ch. XXI.

⁶⁴ Quandt 1993, p. 146; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, February 8, 4:20-5:40 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 1, Nodis Memcons, September-December, Folder 3.

⁶⁵ Yergin, Daniel. *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power*, new edition (New York: Free Press, 2008), Ch. 29.

⁶⁶ Kissinger 1999, pp. 1038-1042.

⁶⁷ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, March 1, 7:30-11:30 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 4, Nodis Memcons, January 1974, Folder 4.

Israeli–Syrian disengagement negotiations. Brezhnev expressed deep concern about the US’s disengagement agreements, accusing Kissinger of trying to prevent the Soviet Union from having a role in the peace process. Brezhnev urged that the Geneva conference format be discussed again to settle these territorial questions, but Kissinger side-stepped this request by promising that final status issues on the Arab–Israeli conflict would be discussed in Geneva, and assured the Soviet premier that these were only interim steps. Brezhnev countered that Asad had requested his involvement. When Kissinger inquired with Asad on this matter, the president said he supported the Soviet’s eventual role in the peace process, but not at this stage, to avoid alienating either superpower.⁶⁸

On the 29th of March 1974, Moshe Dayan, Israel’s defence minister, brought Washington a new proposal to move the peace agreements forward. Along with a substantial military aid package from the United States, Israel would be prepared to agree to a line slightly to the east of the 6th of October line, which included two “limited force” zones, but Quneitra would remain in control of the Israelis. Kissinger knew this plan would be rejected by Asad.⁶⁹ On the 13th of April, General Hikmat al-Shihabi, the chief of staff of the Syrian army, visited Washington and committed to a buffer zone between the two frontlines, along with “limited force areas” to either side, but reaffirmed Asad’s firm position on Quneitra. However, both sides had differing conceptions of the size of the buffer zone and the number of forces allowed on the Golan. Hoping to persuade Israel to make more amenable concessions, Nixon allowed Israel a reprieve from paying \$1 billion of the \$2.2 billion military equipment credit.⁷⁰

To move both parties forward, Kissinger began his shuttle between Israel and Syria on the 29th of April 1974. For Nixon, these negotiations became even more important for buttressing his position domestically in the United States: foreign policy was a refuge for Nixon and the one area where he could hope to leave a legacy not tarnished by his domestic political manoeuvring.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Kissinger 1999, p. 1033–1036; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

⁶⁹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, March 29, 12:05-2:45 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 7, Nodis Memcons, March 1974, Folder 5.

⁷⁰ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, April 13, 10:40-12:33 p.m. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1028, Presidential/HAK Memcons, March 1–May 8, 1974, Folder 2; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, April 25, 5:08-6:35 p.m. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 155, Geopolitical File, Israel, April 1974; Letter. 1974, April 30. From President Nixon to Israeli Prime Minister Meir. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 136, Country Files, Middle East, Dinitz, January 1–July 1, 1974.

⁷¹ Kissinger 1999, p. 1052.

In his first meeting of the shuttle with Israel on the 2nd of May, the Israeli leadership showed no signs of compromise on their proposal and expressed deep reluctance about making concessions to Syria. To help push the Israeli position towards compromise, Nixon sent a letter to Golda Meir urging her to make concessions and warning her of the potential consequences if such an agreement could not be reached.⁷² Visiting Damascus on the 3rd of May without concessions, Kissinger worked to deepen trust between the US and Syria, offering Syria financial aid from the United States. Unsatisfied, Asad continued to press on the 6th of October line's placement, but offered to adjust his position related to the status and levels of forces on the Golan.⁷³

On the 6th and 7th of May, the Israeli leadership came back to Kissinger with a willingness to return the eastern part of Quneitra to the Syrians, a small concession that they hoped would satisfy Asad.⁷⁴ In Kissinger's meetings with Asad on the 8th and 12th of May, Asad insisted that any disengagement-line agreement had to include all of Quneitra as well as the hills overlooking the city that Israel had held since the end of the war. Asad had not directly raised the issue of the hills with Kissinger before. In the Syrian president's estimation, his country would be in a strategically vulnerable position if Israel continued to hold those hills.⁷⁵ On the 13th of May, during Kissinger's visit to Jerusalem, the Israelis agreed to cede Quneitra, but not move on the hills. Visiting Damascus with this significant concession, Kissinger encountered stiff resistance.⁷⁶ Asad insisted that any disengagement line had to run along the peak of the hills, and UN forces instead of Israeli forces had to be stationed

⁷² Letter. 1974, May 4. Letter From President Nixon to Israeli Prime Minister Meir. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 136, Country Files, Middle East, Dinitz, January 1–July 1, 1974; Memorandum. 1974, May 2. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 45, HAK Trip Files, Middle East Memos and Security, April 28–May 31, 1974.

⁷³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 3. National Archives, Box 1028, Presidential/HAK Memcons, March 1–May 8, 1974.

⁷⁴ Memorandum. 1974, May 6. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 136, Country Files, Middle East, Dinitz, January 1–July 1, 1974; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 6, 5:55-6:40 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 7, Nodis Memcons, March 1974, Folder 5; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 7, 9:07-11:15 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 7, Nodis Memcons, March 1974, Folder 1.

⁷⁵ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 8, 12:18 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 8, Nodis Memcons, May 1974, Folder 1; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 12, 1:30-6:15 p.m. National Archives, RG59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 8, Nodis Memcons, May 1974, Folder 4.

⁷⁶ Memorandum. 1974, May 14. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 45, HAK Trip Files, Middle East Memos and Security, April 28–May 31, 1974.

along that line. The Israelis refused to move on this line, citing their own security concerns.⁷⁷

On the 14th of May, President Nixon asked Kissinger to brief him on the extent of American financial and military assistance to Israel. Nixon privately threatened to Kissinger that he would cut all aid to Israel if the Israelis did not make further concessions. Whether Nixon was in a position to do so at this point is debatable, but the move underscored the urgency Nixon placed on securing this agreement as part of his foreign policy legacy.⁷⁸

Bridging their differences, on the 15th of May Kissinger proposed compromises to both Syria and Israel. On the 16th of May, he persuaded the Israelis to agree to withdraw to the base of the hills.⁷⁹ When he visited Asad on the same day, the president insisted that the concessions were insufficient. Asad finally relented as Kissinger, frustrated with the lack of progress, was prepared to leave Damascus. The Syrian president insisted that as a concession, no heavy military equipment could be placed on the eastern slopes of the hills.⁸⁰ Meir and the Israeli leadership agreed to this concession three days later, and Kissinger visited Damascus on the 20th of May with the negotiated line.⁸¹

However, Kissinger encountered further technical issues from both Asad and Meir. Asad insisted on the 21st of May that Israel withdraw from Mount Herman and refused to accede

⁷⁷ Memorandum. 1974, May 14. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 45, HAK Trip Files, Middle East Memos and Security, April 28–May 31, 1974.

⁷⁸ Kissinger 1999, p. 1078; Memorandum. 1974, May 15. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 45, HAK Trip Files, Middle East Memos and Security, April 28–May 31, 1974.

⁷⁹ Memorandum. 1974, May 16. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 136, Country Files, Middle East, Dinitz, January 1–July 1, 1974.

⁸⁰ Telegram. 1974, May 17. From Secretary of State Kissinger to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 45, HAK Trip Files, Middle East, HAKTO 1–179, April 28–May 31, 1974

⁸¹ Telegram. 1974, May 18. From Secretary of State Kissinger to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 45, HAK Trip Files, Middle East, HAKTO 1–179, April 28–May 31, 1974; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 18, 10:30 p.m – 12:15 a.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 8, Nodis Memcons, May 1974, Folder 5; Memorandum. 1974, May 20. From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Nixon. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 45, HAK Trip Files, Middle East Memos and Security, April 28–May 31, 1974.

to Israeli demands on the size of the demilitarized zone between Israel and Syria.⁸² During Kissinger's visit to Damascus on the 23rd of May, Asad softened his position, proposing an increase in the size of the disarmament area and accepting a larger UN force. Asad, in exchange, requested that the limited-force zones still have substantial armaments.⁸³ The Israeli leadership agreed to these concessions on the 24th of May, but required Asad to agree that the Golan Heights could not be used as a point for the Palestinians to launch attacks against Israel.⁸⁴

This final demand struck a particular nerve with President Asad. In his meeting with Kissinger on the 27th of May, Asad stressed: "Let's speak frankly: you mean the Palestinian resistance. I cannot accept any limitations on their activities in this agreement."⁸⁵ On the 28th, Asad committed privately to not allowing the Golan Heights to become a point for launching attacks against Israel. Asad also conceded to the Israelis on their request to keep an observation post on Mount Hermon. These concessions allowed the agreement to go forward, with both parties agreeing to go to Geneva to sign the document.⁸⁶ On the 31st of May in Geneva, the agreement was signed by both parties.⁸⁷ In a letter to President Asad from Richard Nixon, the United States promised to work for a full disengagement from the Golan Heights.⁸⁸ As only an interim step, the Disengagement Agreement signed by both Israel and Syria stated: "This agreement is not a peace agreement. It is a step toward a just and durable peace on the basis of Security Council Resolution 338 dated October 22,

⁸² Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 21, 5:45-9:45 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 8, Nodis Memcons, May 1974, Folder 7.

⁸³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 24. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 8, Nodis Memcons, May 1974, Folder 9.

⁸⁴ Memorandum. 1974, May 24. Memorandum From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Nixon. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 155, Geopolitical File, Israel, May 1974; Telegram. 1974, May 25. From Secretary of State Kissinger to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft). National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 45, HAKTrip Files, Middle East, HAKTO1-179, April 28-May 31, 1974.

⁸⁵ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 27, 9:50 a.m. - 1:15 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 21, Classified External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 2.

⁸⁶ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, May 28, 8:15 p.m. - midnight. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 194, Geopolitical File. Middle East, Peace Negotiations, Israeli-Syrian Relations, Negotiation Books, Volume III, March-May 1974.

⁸⁷ Memorandum of Understanding. 1974, May 31. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 192, Geopolitical File, Middle East, Peace Negotiations, Israeli-Syrian Relations, Disengagement Agreement, May to September 1974; Agreement. 1974, May 31. "Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement." National Archives, RG 59, Records of Joseph Sisco, Box 32, Briefing Book: Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Documents, Under Secretary Sisco.

⁸⁸ Letter. 1974, May 31. Letter From President Nixon to Syrian President Asad. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Joseph Sisco, Box 32, Briefing Book: Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Documents, Under Secretary Sisco.

1973.”⁸⁹ With the signing of the agreement, Nixon waived further repayment of the military assistance credit and also promised to consult with Israel on further steps towards peace with Syria.⁹⁰

Asad’s willingness to show flexibility and engagement with Israel opened the door for a new period in American–Syrian relations. The US also created an opening for substantive relations with a state they once perceived as a “rejectionist,” “Soviet” satellite.

5.4. Nixon’s Last Engagement and the Normalization of Relations

After the successful brokering of the disengagement agreements on the Sinai and the Golan, President Nixon visited the Middle East in June 1974 in an effort to focus attention away from Watergate and capitalize on his secretary of state’s intensive spring of shuttle diplomacy between Israel and its neighbours.⁹¹ President Nixon’s visit to Damascus was historic: he was the first American president in Syria’s history to visit the state. Remarkably for two states who had only begun to have diplomatic relations in the autumn of 1974, the capital prominently displayed American flags welcoming the President of the United States when Nixon arrived. Surprised by this warm welcome from a state who had substantive relations with the Soviet Union, Nixon noted in his diary, “These people want to be friendly with the US and it runs right down to the rank and file and it goes to the fact that they know the Russians. The Americans, of course, may be in that category soon if we are unable to produce on the peace initiatives we begun.”⁹²

In their meeting at the Presidential Palace in Damascus, Hafiz al-Asad remarked to President Nixon, “When I was going to meet you at the airport, my son said, ‘Isn’t this the same President Nixon you attacked?’ I said ‘yes, but now we are friends.’ This illustrates the problem. If we had not spoken frankly to the people, they would not have seen the change.” Asad further stressed to President Nixon, “When we befriend someone, we befriend them frankly and seriously. . . . Permit me to say in this period of estrangement, we cursed the United States as regularly as we prayed. We began to tell our people that we see marks of

⁸⁹ Memorandum of Understanding. 1974, May 31. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 192, Geopolitical File, Middle East, Peace Negotiations, Israeli-Syrian Relations, Disengagement Agreement, May to September 1974; Agreement. 1974, May 31. “Syrian–Israeli Disengagement Agreement.” National Archives, RG 59, Records of Joseph Sisco, Box 32, Briefing Book: Syrian–Israeli Disengagement Documents, Under Secretary Sisco.; Map. “Map of the Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Lines,” National Archives, RG 59, Records of Joseph Sisco, Box 32, Briefing Book: Syrian-Israeli Disengagement Documents, Under Secretary Sisco.

⁹⁰ Letter. 1974, May 31. Letter From President Nixon to Israeli Prime Minister Meir. National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Box 136, Country Files, Middle East, Dinitz, January 1–July 1, 1974.

⁹¹ Kissinger 1999, pp. 1123–1126.

⁹² Nixon 1978, p. 1013.

new trends in US policy. . . . This kind of talk didn't sit well with many in the Party, after twenty years of attacking America. But when the American position is supported by deeds, this will begin to change the people's minds."⁹³

Aware of Syria's balancing of normalized relations with the United States and the Soviet Union, Nixon assured to President Asad that he was not making American relations contingent on Syria's relations with the Soviet Union. Nixon stated, "You can be our friend without being another's enemy." Asad responded, "Our relations with the Soviets are good — we get aid and arms — but our policies stem from our national interests." Subtly critiquing America's past opposition to engaging Arab nationalist states, Asad noted, "With the Soviets, in the long period of our relations, we have always been frank and honest. They know we are Arab nationalists and we will not change."⁹⁴

Normalizing relations for the first time since 1967, Nixon sought to underscore to the Syrian president that the United States would engage Syria on common interests, and not make their relations contingent on Syria changing its Arab nationalist identity to fit America's interests and identity, as past American administrations had done. Breaking from America's former policy of containment, Nixon offered opportunities for cooperation in the fields of economics, commerce, and culture. The US State Department would work to create partnerships and exchanges between the two countries. In addition, both presidents agreed to establish embassies in their respective states.⁹⁵

Asad used his first meeting with Nixon to gauge America's commitment to the peace process. President Asad stressed, "Withdrawal cannot be sub-divided or made in stages, and there can be no separate withdrawals as in the case of the disengagement agreements. . . . From now on, we will not tolerate a Sinai withdrawal without a Golan withdrawal." Avoiding committing the US to a particular course of action, Nixon side-stepped the question by promising that he would consult with Israel and its neighbours. "We will not be a party to separate deals. If we can get everything moving together, we will be delighted. We now need a common strategy," Nixon stated.⁹⁶

Unsatisfied with Nixon's generalities, Asad asked, "What is your concept of borders for Syria?" Avoiding a commitment to President Asad, Nixon rejoined, "We know where it

⁹³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, June 16. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, TS 42, Geopolitical File, Syria, November 1973–July 1976.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, June 16. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, TS 42, Geopolitical File, Syria, November 1973–July 1976.

must end. But remember that only we can do anything with those who block the goal you seek. Have confidence. We know the goal; you know where you must go, but you must do it our way. You must understand this.” Nixon hoped to keep President Asad engaged in the peace process, but also avoid commitments on the peace process the US could not deliver on at that stage. Nixon acknowledged this to the president: “If we now announced that we seek to move Israel from the Golan, the media and Israel’s friends would block us.”⁹⁷ Hafiz al-Asad’s impression of the conversation was different, however. Asad believed that President Nixon had promised him that the US would take steps to engage the Syrian and the Egyptian tracks concurrently.⁹⁸

Leaving Damascus, Nixon wrote down in a diary his impressions of the future of their relations:

All in all, Syria is by far the most difficult country we have in terms of working out some kind of positive continuing relationship. On the other hand, they desperately want to have another string in their bow. They want us to be there, probably to play us against the Russians, and that’s why on the way back I said that we must explore every possible way to make some moves toward the Syrians in the economic area.⁹⁹

Nixon understood the value that Asad saw in having a wider relationship with the United States, both in securing disengagement agreements with Israel and in giving Syria flexibility in its international relations. Unlike the US’s relations with Egypt or Israel, Syria was a more challenging state to have normalized relations with. However, Nixon saw the value of such relations and their potential role in securing America’s interests in the Middle East.

Nixon’s visit to the Middle East was his last overseas visit and represented the end of a pivotal period in American foreign relations. President Nixon resigned in August 1974, with impeachment not far off. Gerald Ford, a Michigan congressman who had no aspirations for the presidency, was sworn into office. Ford asked Kissinger to remain in his government positions. With Ford focused on domestic challenges, Henry Kissinger emerged as the central figure in American foreign relations from 1974 to the end of the Ford presidency in January 1977. Unlike Nixon, who took a substantive interest in foreign policy, Ford relied on Kissinger to guide American foreign relations.¹⁰⁰

5.5. Out of Step with the Step-by-Step Approach

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

⁹⁹ Nixon 1978, p. 1014.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Richard Herman, Palm Springs, March 2012.

According to Abdul Halim Khaddam, Hafiz al-Asad entered the post-disengagement agreements with great confidence. As president of Syria, he successfully re-acquired lost land on the Golan seized by Israel in 1967. While the October War ended in defeat for Syria, it proved that the country was still a strategic threat to Israel. Sadat's betrayal allowed Asad to portray himself as the leading frontline state against Israel and this deepened his relations with Arab states in the region. In particular, his relations with Riyadh grew, with King Faisal providing substantial financial support to the Asad regime.¹⁰¹

Asad insisted step-by-step agreements could no longer suffice. In his estimation, he could not sell multiple partial agreements with Israel. Equally, the president could not support a negotiating process which prioritized Egypt over Syria. Asad did not trust Israel's intentions in the negotiating process, and believed that if Israel concluded another agreement with Egypt, there would be no incentive to seek a territorial settlement with Syria. In a meeting with Kissinger on the 10th of October 1974, Asad stressed, "The French stayed here as long as Israel has been established. And, I know, it's my generation that experienced it. But they seem to be a people determined with expansionism, fascists in every sense of the word. . . . So, it is very difficult to see if peace can be brought in this area. Of course, this doesn't mean we'll give up our efforts here. But the Arabs shouldn't be deceived." The Syrian president believed that the only way forward was concurrent negotiations between Israel and its neighbours on the return of territory lost in the 1967 war. The question of Palestine would have to be settled as well.¹⁰²

The US position, however, was very far from Asad's. Discussing the challenges of pursuing further disengagement agreements between Israel and its neighbours, Kissinger noted to President Ford on the 12th of August 1974 that "the Arabs' demand is for the 1967 frontiers. Israel considers that these would be the end of Israel. The country was only 12 kilometers wide in some places. Almost all of Israel would be under SAM coverage. The Palestinians' rights are undefined and Jerusalem very complicated." Outlining his strategy to move the disengagement agreements forward, Kissinger argued, "We must move step by step, which will make further steps possible. Israel says another Golan move is the last one. That is not impossible but it is very difficult. To keep that last, we must move with Jordan or Egypt."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam; Sunayama, Sonoko. *Syria and Saudi Arabia: Collaboration and Conflicts in the Oil Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

¹⁰² Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, October 11, 6:30-9:15 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 21, Classified External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 5.

¹⁰³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, August 12, 9 am. Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, MI (hereafter Ford Library), NSA Memcon, Box 4, August 12, 1974, Ford, Kissinger. .

5.6. Engaging Jordan

Kissinger believed that an engagement agreement with Jordan was the most feasible step after Golan disengagement. In his estimation, an agreement signed directly between the Palestinians and Israel could not be achieved. Instead, Kissinger hoped to persuade Israel to return the West Bank to Jordan, allowing the Jordanians to have administration over a significant part of Palestinian territory. This agreement would provide Israel security assurances on the Palestinian question and would lessen Jordan's Palestinian refugee problem as the kingdom was forced to leave the West Bank in 1967.¹⁰⁴

However, this disengagement agreement was one that Hafiz al-Asad could never accept. Meeting with Kissinger in Damascus on the 14th of October 1974, Asad stressed, "The PLO position concerning Jordanian negotiations with Israel is well known. They are against it. The PLO want to get the West Bank for themselves and be recognized as the representatives of the Palestinian people. It is not for Jordan to speak for them. That is why the PLO will not see anything helpful in the US position."¹⁰⁵ Asad could not support a process that tried to legitimate Jordan's King Hussein as the leader of the Palestinian people instead of him. This agreement also represented a strategic threat to Syria's interests. Asad's championing of the Palestinian cause brought significant political weight in the Arab world and financial support from the Gulf.¹⁰⁶

To undermine the American initiative, Asad used the Rabat Summit in 1974 to secure Arab League recognition of the PLO as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinians in negotiations with Israel. King Hussein was then in no position to make a credible settlement offer to the Israelis along the lines that Kissinger had envisioned. Asad left open to Kissinger the opportunity for the United States to play a role on the Palestinian question if Syria's needs were accommodated. Asad believed that he could use Syria's influence with the Palestinians both to create an obstacle to Israel securing a wider peace settlement in the region without taking in account Syria's interests, and as a bargaining point in his negotiations with the United States and Israel. Kissinger did not see a potential path forward as long as Asad insisted that the PLO needed to be a direct participant in the negotiations

¹⁰⁴ Kissinger 1999, pp. 1138–1142.

¹⁰⁵ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, October 14, 2-4:45 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 21, Classified External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 5.

¹⁰⁶ Seale 1988, p. 252–255.

with Israel. Further agreement between Syria and the United States on the status of the Palestinians was effectively hindered.¹⁰⁷

5.7. Egypt First and then Syria: A Partial, but not Full, Withdrawal

On the question of further disengagement agreements on the Golan, Kissinger took a more conservative position on what could be achieved in negotiations with Israel than Asad envisioned. In conversations with Yigal Allon, Israel's foreign minister, on the future borders of Israel at Camp David on the 1st of August 1974, Kissinger stated, "I do think it is impossible to accept the 1967 frontiers with Syria." Outlining what he did see was possible, Kissinger explained, "On the Syrian side, it can't be 1967 but it can't be the present line because I think it may be necessary to go one more move with Syria. But it will be some clear distance from 1967."¹⁰⁸

Acknowledging the deep hurdles of securing a second agreement on Syria to President Ford on the 12th of August 1974, Kissinger noted, "On Syria, Israel can't give up all the Golan, but it can be more flexible. The problem is the settlements they have right up to the line. We use your newness to delay." Seeing Egypt as the most viable track, Ford agreed with Kissinger that negotiations between Israel and Egypt should be the first priority.¹⁰⁹ Kissinger later characterized this strategy in this light: "My previous strategy was to do Egypt and then close down the whole thing until after our elections. I was not, quite frankly, going to spill very much blood for Syria. Get it started maybe and then let it drag into 1976."¹¹⁰

President Ford and Henry Kissinger met with Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister, at the White House on the 13th of September 1974 to discuss how to move forward on a second round of disengagement agreements. Rabin showed willingness to pursue a second disengagement agreement with Egypt, but not at that stage with Syria. Rabin enquired also on what the US's current position was on the Golan. Kissinger replied, "At the time of the Syrian disengagement, I said we would not push Israel off the Golan." Giving his personal assurances that he would prioritize Israel's interests in the negotiating process, Ford stressed, "I reaffirm that commitment." Rabin expressed his personal gratitude for this position. Aware that setting a red line on the Golan could cause problems for his negotiations with Asad and Sadat, Kissinger requested, "For us to keep this process going, we need some

¹⁰⁷ Kissinger 1999, pp. 1138–1142

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum of Understanding. 1974, August 1. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 9, Nodis Memcons, August 1974, Folder 3.

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, August 12, 9 am. Ford Library, NSA Memcon, Box 4, August 12, 1974, Ford, Kissinger.

¹¹⁰ Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, April 3. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 22, Classified External Memcons, December 1974 to April 1975, Folder 7.

ambiguity, you know. We take the position that it is unrealistic to discuss final borders. If Israel could avoid saying what they will never do with the Syrians, we would be better off.” Rabin agreed that Israel would not make any statements publicly that could cast doubt on the US and Israel’s intentions regarding the Golan. Kissinger was concerned that Asad could try to disrupt the peace process if the Syria track was not seen as being actively pursued.¹¹¹

In Kissinger’s meetings with President Asad on the 10th and 14th of October 1974, the secretary of state sought to give Asad the impression that negotiations resulting in the full disengagement from the Golan Heights were under consideration by the United States. Kissinger noted to Asad, “We did not discuss any particular withdrawal for any particular country but it is clear to me that in order of readiness or difficulty for Israel the line-up is Egypt first, then the West Bank and then Syria.” Stressing the difficulty of pursuing an agreement on the Golan immediately, Kissinger stated, “Specifically that the next movement in the Golan Heights would require the movement of Israeli settlements and that, therefore, he had to be prepared for the most massive problems. . . . And we have to make sure what the right time is to bring that pressure.” Kissinger was candid with the Syrian president about the obstacle of persuading Israel to remove settlements on the Golan, but he was less candid with Asad about when the “right time” for negotiations would occur.¹¹²

Asad pushed back against Kissinger’s step-by-step strategy, stating, “On the contrary, the Israelis are behaving in a manner similar to before the war. Nothing has changed.” Recounting his perception of Nixon’s commitments to him in June 1974, Asad noted, “Because the United States assured us that the United States would not be a party to a separate deal. He said when we talk about subdividing the question, he said we do not mean subdividing the Golan or the Sinai or the West Bank but we mean tackling the subject itself in different categories. Category one is withdrawal from 1967, Jerusalem would be another category, and the Palestinian people would be the third category.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, September 13, 12:15 p.m. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Kissinger–Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, Box 15, Israel, Items 8–14, September 3–15, 1974.

¹¹² Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, October 11, 6:30-9:15 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 21, Classified External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 5; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, October 14, 2-4:45 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 21, Classified External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 5.

¹¹³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, October 11, 6:30-9:15 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 21, Classified External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 5; Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, October 14, 2-4:45 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 21, Classified External Memcons, November 1974, Folder 5.

Avoiding Asad's interpretation of the Nixon's words, Kissinger tactfully noted, "That must have happened at dinner." Asad pressed further: "It happened when you were there." Kissinger had no interest in pursuing simultaneous disengagement agreements with Israel, because he knew Rabin would not agree to such an initiative and it would hinder the possibility of securing a second disengagement with Egypt. Adding further complications for Kissinger's territorial negotiations, Asad stressed, "And we ourselves should think on the lines of needing more secure borders further west and south — Galilee for instance." Confident of Egyptian support for this agreement, Asad boasted to Kissinger, "We have a signed agreement between ourselves that there will be no separate agreement."¹¹⁴

Kissinger's meetings in October 1974 illustrated the deep differences between his words and his intentions. Richard Murphy, America's ambassador to Damascus during this period, recalls that Asad was under the impression these talks were a genuine, "on-going affair" on securing a full disengagement on the Golan Heights. Murphy noted, "Asad was always ready to see me" to discuss the disengagement agreement.¹¹⁵

According to Murphy, Kissinger also kept him largely in the dark on the strategy for his disengagement negotiations with Syria. The ambassador notes, "When Kissinger came through,...it was always seen as maybe something else would happen. But, there was never any of the highly detailed discussions [on what the disengagement agreement would entail in the case of the Sinai track]." Kissinger repeatedly assured Murphy that while negotiations were very difficult on the Golan, they were not impossible and were continuing. Looking back on his time as ambassador, Murphy noted that Kissinger's lack of frankness with him had to do with the secretary's proclivity to keep his negotiations on a "need to know" basis.¹¹⁶

Asad's insistence during the October meetings that Egypt would not enter into a separate disengagement agreement as long as a second agreement with Syria was not considered proved a difficult obstacle for Kissinger to overcome. President Sadat resisted Kissinger's plans to enter into a Sinai II process without Israel committing to a second disengagement agreement on the Golan. In a meeting in Cairo on the 5th of October 1974, Egyptian foreign minister Ismail Fahmy stressed that Sadat would not move without a similar move on the Golan. Kissinger met with Rabin on the 8th of November 1974 in Jerusalem and urged him to consider an agreement with Syria to remove Sadat's unwillingness to move forward on another Sinai II agreement. Rabin showed no interest in discussing a disengagement

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Richard Murphy, New York City, 2013.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

agreement at this stage and Ford and Kissinger were not prepared to endanger the Sinai track by pushing too hard on Rabin.¹¹⁷

Kissinger and his senior aides became concerned, though, that a failure of these efforts could produce another war in the Middle East. On the 31st of March 1975, Kissinger noted to a group of former senior national security officials, “When I was trying to keep Syria out of the war, I gave them our intelligence estimate. I said you’d be badly beaten. Asad’s reply was interesting. He said, “You don’t understand that the lesson we learned in 1973 — what we finally understood — was that the Israelis could not stand pain. We won’t win the war, but we will keep them fighting for many weeks until they can stand it no longer.”¹¹⁸

Instead of applying pressure on Israel to change its position, Kissinger focused on changing Egypt’s position. In a meeting with President Sadat on the 9th of March 1975, Kissinger succeeded in convincing Sadat to de-link Syria as a condition for future peace talks with Israel.¹¹⁹ When he met with Asad in Damascus the next day, the Syrian president expressed his concerns about Egypt pursuing a peace track independent of Syria. The president stated, “I am not optimistic. . . . A solution cannot come about without another war. That which has been lost by war, must be returned by war.” At this point, Asad was not considering going to war, but he knew that the threat of Syrian military action if peace initiatives failed was a useful point of pressure. Offering a counter-proposal, Asad suggested to Kissinger that the US put on hold the Sinai II preliminary discussions and work on preparing a disengagement agreement with Syria and Israel so that both sets of talks could occur at the same time. However, Kissinger rejected this approach and argued that his step-by-step approach had a better chance of securing a disengagement agreement than concurrent negotiations.¹²⁰

Progress on the Egyptian–Israeli disengagement agreement soon encountered obstacles. Kissinger concluded that Rabin would not make the necessary concessions on the borders of

¹¹⁷Memorandum of Conversation. 1974, October 5, 7:30-8:51 a.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 5, Nodis Memcons, November 1974, Folder 1; Memorandum. 1974, November 8. From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Ford. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 156, Geopolitical File, Israel, October 1974.

¹¹⁸Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, March 31. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 22, Classified External Memcons, December 1974 to April 1975, Folder 7.

¹¹⁹Memorandum. 1975, March 9. Memorandum From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Ford. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Kissinger Reports on USSR, China, and Middle East, Box 3, March 7–March 22, 1975, Volume 1.1 (2), Kissinger’s Trip.

¹²⁰Memorandum. 1975, March 10. Memorandum From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft) to President Ford. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Kissinger Reports on USSR, China, and Middle East, Box 3, March 7–March 22, 1975, Volume 1.1 (2), Kissinger’s Trip.

the Sinai to move forward with the disengagement agreement. On the 28th of March 1975, frustrated with Israeli recalcitrance, President Ford informed his National Security Council that he was reassessing the peace diplomacy. Ford and Kissinger hoped that this would put pressure on Israel to make new concessions. Ford informed his national security team that he was reviewing US aid commitments to Israel and suspending new aid agreements with Israel.¹²¹ Ford's position on Israel was soon undercut by domestic pressures. On the 21st of May 1975, seventy-six US Senators wrote a letter to Ford calling for his administration to be "responsive to Israel's economic and military needs." President Ford concluded that pressing Israel would cost him substantially domestically and he lifted his suspension of aid.¹²²

Israel's reluctance to engage on the Sinai with Egypt represented a larger philosophical problem for the Israeli leadership. Aware of the political cost of any of these agreements, Rabin did not share the same urgency for a peace agreement with his state's neighbours as Ford and Kissinger did. Egypt was in position after the 1973 war to challenge Israel militarily. Rabin as a result didn't view Egypt as a pressing threat and believed that the brokered partial disengagement from the Sinai would prevent Egypt from jeopardizing such a gain in the short term with another military conflict with Israel. Rabin also doubted the intention of his neighbours, in particular Syria, which was undertaking a substantial re-armament to levels above the 1973 war since the signing of the first disengagement agreement. For the Israeli leadership, according to Avi Shlaim, Asad's interests in pursuing military parity seemed contrary to his desires for peace. Asad's perception that he could secure the return of the Golan through peace or war made Syria a state that Rabin did not trust. In addition, the return of land on the Golan would encounter significant domestic backlash if he was forced to remove settlers from the area, which Israel had never done its history.¹²³

As part of their reassessment of the peace initiatives, Kissinger met with his American ambassador corps in the region. He noted in their meeting on the 8th of April 1975, "What are our options? A little agreement, a peace settlement, or a semi-permanent interim agreement. A peace agreement I don't think can be faced. The semi-permanent interim agreement, say of ten years with Syria, I don't exclude. Perhaps along the lines of an El-

¹²¹Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, March 26, 9:22-10:18 a.m. Ford Library, NSA Memcon, Box 10, March 26, 1975, Ford, Kissinger; Minutes. 1975, March 28, 3:15-5:15 p.m. National Security Council Meeting. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Box 1, NSC Meetings File, NSC Meeting, March 28, 1975.

¹²² Kissinger 1999, Ch. 12; Memorandum. 1975, June 21. Briefing Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations (McCloskey) to Secretary of State Kissinger. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 158, Geopolitical File, Israel, June 1-20, 1975; Interview with Richard Herman.

¹²³ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, Ch. 8.

Arif–El-Tor line and something between non-belligerency and non-use of force. The Syrians being in a way more legitimate can make more concessions than the Egyptians.”¹²⁴

To move the peace talks forward, in a meeting on the 14th of April 1975, Kissinger and President Ford agreed to revive the Sinai disengagement track. However, Kissinger concluded that the US would have to try to revive the Syrian track to keep the Egyptian peace talks on talk.¹²⁵

President Ford asked Kissinger, “Do you mean a good faith effort, or actually doing something?” Kissinger responded:

Things have changed. Before, I think a good faith effort would have done it, but Sadat has now been placed in a more difficult position, and the Syrians, who would have accepted most anything in March, are now in a stronger position. Therefore our effort would have to be as great as now. A shuttle wouldn’t suffice because that has been depreciated now. Asad is under pressure at home for going too far. He told me his domestic situation will be impossible if Sadat gets something and he doesn’t. I said the Israeli settlements were so far forward that we could get only a sliver, or else something greater in the context of peace. He said that in the context of peace he could assure there would be no Syrian troops forward of the line looking into Israel. I reported this in Israel as a great achievement, but it was counterproductive because I think the last thing Israel wants is a negotiation with Syria.¹²⁶

Kissinger also expressed concerns about the concessions the White House would possibly have to make to convince Israel to move on a disengagement agreement with Egypt. He noted that the US would likely have to promise to not force Israel to make any additional withdrawals from territory they had occupied in 1967 for a period up to three years. Kissinger was concerned that such assurances would shatter the perception that the US was genuinely pursuing a “step-by-step” strategy after Egypt. The secretary of state and President Ford agreed to pursue concessions with Israel on the Golan, alongside an Egypt agreement.¹²⁷

President Ford and Kissinger met with Rabin at the White House on the 11th of June 1975. Rabin struck a firm tone on a peace settlement with Israel’s neighbours: “We cannot withdraw to the 1967 borders in the Sinai. We cannot go down from the Golan Heights even in the context of peace. . . . And on the Golan for example, for a period of say 10 to 20 years, until there is a change of attitudes that occurs with the Arabs. The concept of stationing of

¹²⁴ Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, April 8, 11 a.m. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 346, State Department Memorandum of Conversations, Internal, April–May 1975.

¹²⁵ Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, April 14, 11:15 a.m -12:50 p.m. Ford Library, NSA Memcon, Box 10, April 14, 1975.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

forces and changing of attitudes, it is applicable to Egypt as well.” Rabin said he was open to discussing an interim agreement with Egypt, but pushed back on a similar interim agreement on the Golan. Rabin acknowledged, “We cannot evacuate settlements in an interim agreement. I am being frank. That is not true in an overall settlement.” On what he could offer Syria at this stage, Rabin stated, “All we can do in the Golan would be cosmetic.”¹²⁸

Kissinger pressed Rabin on this point: “Even three kilometers? How many settlements would you have to move?” Mordechai Gazit, the director-general of the Prime Minister’s Office, noted that more than half a dozen settlements would need to be moved. Deflecting Kissinger’s question, Rabin rejoined, “It is not only a question of settlements. It is also the destruction of our defensive line which would have to be rebuilt and would take at least two or three years.” Kissinger pushed further on Israel’s position, but Rabin remarked that an interim agreement could not require the removal of any settlements. Ford asked Rabin what he envisioned for a final settlement with Syria. Rabin responded, “I have said that this would involve both changes of the boundary line, as well as deployment to a defensible border. But I have no Cabinet decision. I would be willing to take something like this to the Cabinet for a decision, even though this would bring about probably an election in Israel.”¹²⁹

President Ford and Henry Kissinger met the following day, the 12th of June 1975. Kissinger noted to Ford that after the three of them had met in the oval office on the 11th of June, Rabin informed Kissinger that he would consider a “cosmetic” line of “a few hundred yards in Syria and to give Asad a part of the demilitarized zone” as a small concession to Syria. While this was not the limited disengagement they envisioned, Ford and Kissinger welcomed this concession and believed it would allow the peace process with Egypt to advance. They concluded that Rabin was not in a position politically to remove the settlements on the Golan.¹³⁰

On the 15th of June 1975, Kissinger agreed to Rabin’s “cosmetic line” offer. Simon Dinitz, the Israeli ambassador to the US, asked Kissinger, “Would there be a principle agreed that we would not be asked to get out of the Golan Heights although the line there might change?” Kissinger assured the Israeli team of his support and noted that he could construct the negotiations in a way that would deceive Asad so that Tel Aviv would not have to make substantial concessions:

¹²⁸ Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, June 11, 10 a.m – noon. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 11, Nodis Memcons, June 1975, Folder 2.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Memorandum of Understanding. 1975, June 12. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Memoranda of Conversations, Box 12, June 12, 1975.

As to my ideas in regard to Syria. . . . We would both understand that they would not be likely to succeed. Then at a time when a stalemate appears near, you would make some cosmetic changes unilaterally as a gesture of good will. Then we would jointly recommend that the negotiations be moved to the overall stage. By that time there would be no compulsion to enter into intensive talks. We would conduct ourselves defensively, aiming at avoiding being isolated.¹³¹

As Ford and Kissinger were finalizing the details of the “cosmetic line” with Israel, the president and Kissinger met with Abdul Halim Khaddam and the Syrian ambassador to the United States, Sabah Kabbani, on the 20th of June 1975 in Washington. Ford made the case to the Syrian delegation that a step-by-step approach towards a final settlement, including possibly Geneva was the conclusion of their review of policy. They informed Khaddam that Egypt would be the first step. Kissinger did not disclose during the meeting the “cosmetic” concession Israel was willing to offer on the Golan, however.

In response to Kissinger, Khaddam stressed:

Our view is that activities should start simultaneously, because otherwise it would leave the impression of favouritism. . . . We actually appeal to President Ford and the US Government to consider our attitude. We can't afford to ignore Arab public opinion. If Israel can't ignore the views of a few settlers on the Golan, how can we ignore the views of 100 million Arabs? Every day Israel makes statements about keeping the Golan, the West Bank, and Gaza, etc. If Israel is not dilly-dallying to reach the end of the US elections, how does that jell with the fact that nothing has happened for 10 months? In fact, I repeat my plea — we desire peace, but we are apprehensive because we don't want another year of stalemate.

Avoiding Khaddam's substantive critique of US policy, Kissinger sought to ameliorate Syria's concerns, noting that President Ford genuinely hoped to pursue peace between Israel and Syria and recognized “Syria as the center of the Arab nation.”¹³²

Finalizing the “cosmetic” line agreement, Ambassador Dinitz met with Kissinger on the 1st of July 1975. Dinitz asked Kissinger, “With regard to Syria, is it clear and understood that an interim agreement with Syria would only constitute cosmetic changes and that to the extent there was no agreement with Syria it would not affect U.S.–Israeli relations in the political, economic or military spheres?” Kissinger replied that the United States was amenable to this position.¹³³

¹³¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, June 15, 12:15-2:35 p.m. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 158, Geopolitical File, Israel, May 1975.

¹³² Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, June 20. Ford Library, NSA Memcon, Box 13, June 20, 1975, Ford, Kissinger.

¹³³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, July 1, 9 p.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 23, Classified External Memcons, May–December 1975, Folder 3.

In his final meeting in Damascus on the 23rd of August 1975 with Hafiz al-Asad, Henry Kissinger presented his new initiative to begin negotiations on the Golan to the Syrian president, but noted to Asad that Israel would not be able to withdraw completely from the Golan Heights at that stage. Asad sceptically asked:

What's the use of a few kilometers in the southern Syrian front? No, if Israel remains in Golan, as her actions and strengthening of settlements seem to indicate, then it is absolutely hopeless even to fool our people with any hopeful prospects. What would any Syrian, or any Arab for that matter, feel when he sees Quneitra as a ghost town? What kind of liberation can we call that when the Israelis are not only looking down on Quneitra but also building more and more things right on the edge of that city! Are we kidding?!

Attempting to placate Asad from taking any action that would disrupt the Egypt agreement, Kissinger conveyed a surprisingly candid message from President Ford to President Asad: "Frankly we cannot tolerate any more a nation of 3 million dictating to the U.S. policies which are not necessarily in our best interest." Kissinger urged Asad to have patience and assured him that after the US Congressional elections in 1977, the domestic political conditions would be more favourable for securing a peace settlement. Kissinger also conceded that Nixon's resignation had set back the process. Their meeting ended amicably, but from these talks Asad concluded that US-led negotiations with Israel would not lead to the return of the Golan Heights. However, resigning himself to the prospect of an Israeli–Egyptian agreement, the Syrian president concluded that nothing could be done to alter the course of those negotiations.¹³⁴

On the 1st of September 1975, an Egyptian–Israeli agreement on the Sinai was signed in Geneva by representatives of the Egyptian and Israeli governments.¹³⁵ Ford and Kissinger had succeeded in their over-arching strategy of bringing one of Israel's neighbours out of conflict, and leaving its other neighbours isolated and without the ability to launch a simultaneous multiple-front war with Israel. But in exchange, Ford had agreed to a number of terms that would severely constrain his ability to act in the region. Accompanying this agreement was a Memorandum of Agreement between the governments of Israel and the United States. The United States committed to two critical points to secure Israel's withdrawal. First, "The United States Government will make every effort to be fully responsive, within the limits of its resources and Congressional authorization and

¹³⁴ Memorandum of Understanding. 1975, August 23. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Kissinger Reports on USSR, China, and Middle East, Box 4, August 21–September 1, 1975, Volume I (3), Sinai Disengagement Agreement. Agreement. 1975, September 1. "Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement." Department of State Bulletin, September 29, 1975, pp. 466–470; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

¹³⁵ Agreement. 1975, September 1. "Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement." Department of State Bulletin, September 29, 1975, pp. 466–470.

appropriation, on an on-going and long-term basis, to Israel's military equipment and other defense requirements, to its energy requirements and to its economic needs." Second, "The United States Government will not join in and will seek to prevent efforts by others to bring about consideration of proposals which it and Israel agree are detrimental to the interests of Israel." In a complete betrayal of President Hafiz al-Asad, Sadat agreed to not undertake any "belligerent" action against Israel if Syria engaged in a war against it.¹³⁶

At Rabin's request, President Ford also noted in his letter accompanying the signing of the agreement in Geneva:

The U.S. will support the position that an overall settlement with Syria in the framework of a peace agreement must assure Israel's security from attack from the Golan Heights. The U.S. further supports the position that a just and lasting peace, which remains our objective, must be acceptable to both sides. The U.S. has not developed a final position on the borders. Should it do so it will give great weight to Israel's position that any peace agreement with Syria must be predicated on Israel remaining on the Golan Heights.¹³⁷

In allowing Israel to set the terms for the Sinai disengagement, President Ford effectively undercut his ability to add any further pressure on Israel with the signing of these documents. Even if Gerald Ford had won the 1976 presidential elections, his ability to re-draw the line on the Golan would have been severely constrained by the nearly iron-clad security concessions he gave Israel with the signing of the Sinai II agreement. Ford effectively conceded his ability to use aid as an incentive to make peace. This agreement allowed the United States to consolidate its relationship with Egypt and effectively ensured Israel's security by bringing Egypt, the main strategic challenger to Israel, out of conflict with Israel, but more broadly, it limited the United States from securing a wider peace settlement in the region.

In terms of American relations with Syria, Ford precluded an opportunity for substantial security cooperation between the United States and Syria on the Arab-Israeli conflict. While the US may have entertained the idea that a more isolated Syria would be more willing to make peace on terms more favourable to Israel, after the signing of the disengagement agreement with Egypt, according to Abdul Halim Khaddam, President Asad showed no substantial interest in re-engaging the United States on a settlement during Ford's term in office. Asad was not interested in getting drawn into further empty promises. As noted in

¹³⁶ Memorandum. 1975, September 1. Memoranda of Agreement. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 159, Geopolitical File, Israel, September 1-17, 1975.

¹³⁷ Letter. 1975. Letter From President Ford to Israeli Prime Minister Rabin. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 15, Miscellaneous, Documents, Telegrams, etc., 1975, Folder 8.

this chapter, Kissinger came away with the similar conclusion that merely isolating Asad wouldn't make him more amenable to making peace on Israel's terms, but instead, this agreement succeeded in preventing Egypt and Syria from going to war with Israel.¹³⁸

5.8. A Missed Peace

In an assessment of Israeli policy on Syria in the months before the signing of the Sinai II agreement that Henry Kissinger addressed to a group of Jewish political leaders in New York on the 15th of June 1975, he said, "We could have split the Palestinians from the Syrians for only a few more kilometers on the Golan, but the Israelis insisted on moving the settlements right up to the line. My feeling now is that the Syrians will be driven toward even greater radicalism. Israel must realize that it must deal with the Arab governments if it does not want to deal with the Palestinians. But you know, Israel is a lot like Germany before the First World War in that there is this tendency to produce what it most fears." Kissinger, however, did not acknowledge the US's role in preventing these negotiations from succeeding.¹³⁹

Contrary to the received wisdom, which often points to Israel's intransigence or Syria's militant rejectionism as the sole explanation for why the Golan disengagement agreements never progressed past the first disengagement agreement in 1947, this chapter, employing extensive documents from this period, has shown the United States played a substantial role in these negotiations' failure. From the very beginning of Ford's presidency, both the president and Kissinger decided to prioritize a settlement with Egypt over a settlement with Syria. A second Golan agreement was seen as infeasible because of Israel's refusal to move on the settlements on the Golan. Ford and Kissinger were not willing to risk derailing the peace initiative with Egypt, and were equally unwilling to expend political capital on the Syria track. Ford and Kissinger recognized as well that Egypt, strategically more important for Israel than Syria, was more of a priority for Israel, and as a result, a more obtainable foreign policy objective. They also came to the conclusion that while a permanent peace between Israel and her neighbours couldn't be secured without an agreement with Syria and Egypt, the removal of Egypt from conflict with Israel would effectively remove any real strategic threat that Israel's neighbours pose to the state's existence. Syria was never in a position to go to war unilaterally against Israel without the support of Egypt. Finally, pulling Egypt, the Soviet Union's main strategic ally in the region up until early 1970s, out of the

¹³⁸ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

¹³⁹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, June 15, 9:15 a.m. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-77, Box 8, Nodis Memcons, May 1974, Folder 11.

Soviet Union's orbit of influence would be a larger strategic gain in the region against the Soviet Union than pulling Syria out of the Soviet orbit.

Due to the fragile domestic political environment in the wake of Watergate and the upcoming presidential elections in 1976, Ford and Kissinger recognized that with the very limited political capital they had at home to expend on these disengagement agreements that the costs of pressing Israel to make concessions on both the Golan and Sinai was too high. At the same time, though, Ford and Kissinger often purposely advanced policies that gave priority and preference to Israel's security interests over those of Israel's neighbours. At key points in their negotiations with Israel, the United States adopted Israel's positions even though such positions at times were contrary to their own interests.

These negotiations also showed how Ford and Kissinger were willing to employ deception in their negotiations with Asad. On repeated occasions after the signing of the first disengagement agreement, Kissinger misrepresented the US's position on the Golan Heights to keep Asad from potentially destabilizing the negotiations with Egypt. Kissinger even urged Israel to misrepresent its public position to keep Asad from questioning the peace process the US was brokering.

As the documents from this period show, Asad was far from the militant confrontationalist that Nixon and Kissinger had first expected. Asad's willingness to act independently from the Soviet Union surprised Nixon and Kissinger, who were used to viewing the relationship between the great powers and the Third World in the framework of well-defined paradigms. Asad broke this mould; he was both a significant recipient of Soviet assistance and a leader willing to engage the United States and pursue policies independent of the Soviet Union.

Also surprising to the United States, Asad was willing to enter into substantive negotiations with the United States and Israel to achieve a settlement of 1967, a first in his country's history. As Abdul Halim Khaddam noted, Asad engaged in the negotiations under the impression that Kissinger was a serious broker.¹⁴⁰ Asad even offered Kissinger security concessions on the border between Israel and Syria, including demilitarizing the border between Syria and Israel, to try to assuage Israeli concerns about withdrawing from the Golan, but by the autumn of 1975 neither the United States nor Israel wished to engage Syria in substantive terms on the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

¹⁴¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, April 14, 11:15 a.m -12:50 p.m. Ford Library, NSA Memcon, Box 10, April 14, 1975.

Relations, though, could have taken a different turn if President Ford and Henry Kissinger had taken the risk of expending political capital and genuinely engaged Asad in the peace process, instead of prioritizing Egypt at the cost of a disengagement agreement with Syria. Khaddam recalled that Asad was prepared to sign a disengagement agreement with Syria if Israel was willing to end the occupation of Syrian territory. Khaddam noted as well that Asad, however, would not sign a formal peace agreement until the status of the Palestinians was resolved. Inherent in Syria's identity, Asad could not make a formal peace with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. Rifaat al-Asad noted as well that his brother was prepared to take the necessary steps to achieve a settlement with Israel.¹⁴²

By not taking this path, Ford and Kissinger succeeded in disengaging Egypt from conflict with Israel, but didn't achieve a wider peace in the region. Khaddam recalled that after the failure of these talks, Asad had no further interest in speaking to Kissinger. Khaddam noted that while Asad respected America's interests in the region, the Syrian president stressed that America's interests should not come at the expense of Syria's. The Syrian president was willing to maintain relations with the United States, but came away from these talks with the conclusion that the US could not be a reliable partner for peace because its interests were too interlinked with Israel's.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad.

¹⁴³ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

CHAPTER 6

THE US ACQUIESCES TO SYRIA'S INTERVENTION IN LEBANON

US–SYRIAN RELATIONS AND LEBANON'S CIVIL WAR OF 1975–1976

Lebanon has long been an important political fault line in the Middle East. Born out of the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century and enlarged by the French during the 1920s, Lebanon has also always struggled with its identity. With its population divided into 20 or more different sects, a national Lebanese identity could never insulate the country from the politics of its neighbours. Jockeying for political power, the different sectarian groups had their own relationships with states outside of Lebanon's borders. Lebanon's neighbours also used their relationships with these different groups to pursue their regional interests.

Lebanon's political system founded on the basis of allocating political rights and representation based on sectarian identity exacerbated these tensions. France, who played a critical role in constructing this confessional system, gave special political privileges to the Maronite Christian community at the expense of the Sunni community. By the 1960s, the Maronite Christian community was substantially smaller than the Sunni community in Lebanon.

The Arab–Israeli conflict further stressed its domestic politics, with a large influx of Palestinian refugees arriving after the Six–Day War of 1967. The Maronite Christian community felt threatened by the growing number of Palestinians in Lebanon, which further tilted the confessional demographic balance against them and had strong ties with the Sunni community. This volatile mix of confessionalism made Lebanon particularly troublesome to the security of Israel and Syria. It was not until the 1970s, with the consolidation of the Syrian state under Hafiz al-Asad, that Damascus considered Lebanon in the context of the wider Arab–Israeli conflict and Syria's own position in the region.

With the failure to reach a full disengagement on the Golan Heights, President Asad confronted a precarious strategic and geographic environment. With Israel militarily occupying the Golan Heights, an important geographic buffer between Syria and Israel, the prevention of the emergence of an anti-Syrian government in Lebanon became an even more pressing concern. Asad became concerned that Lebanon could become another point from

which Israel could further encircle Syria and put Syria in a disadvantageous position in relation to Israel. The loss of both the Golan Heights and an unfavourable government in Lebanon would be too high of cost for Syria's security.

The United States has had ties with Lebanon from the early years of its statehood. Mount Lebanon's privileged Maronite Christian community had ties with American missionaries that pre-existed the Lebanese state, and in the Maronites the United States found a group it could identify with culturally. During the Cold War, however, Lebanon's fragility also posed a challenge to the United States. In 1958, the United States under President Eisenhower intervened militarily in the Arab world to support the Maronite community against the potential threat of Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Sunni allies, who sought to reconfigure the National Pact—the first US military intervention in the region since Tripoli in the 19th century.¹

Despite these ties, in the 1970s the small Lebanese state remained on the periphery of America's regional and wider global interests. With an expansive number of commitments around the world and in the region, President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, viewed Lebanon's confessional tensions with concern, but not enough to expend American resources and time directly.

In the background of Kissinger's negotiations on Sinai II and the fading possibility of a Syrian–Israeli disengagement agreement, in the spring of 1975 the United States and Syria began to have surprisingly a limited level of security cooperation on Lebanon as the state disintegrated. Despite the failure to broker a second disengagement agreement on the Golan by 1975, both the United States and Syria recognized the value of engaging one another on the crisis developing in Lebanon. As this chapter illustrates, though, their reasons for engaging one another varied. Even though Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad became disillusioned with Kissinger's ability to deliver on the Golan, Richard Murphy notes that Asad still saw the value of engaging the United States because of its position as a superpower and its relations with Israel, even if America pursued interests, as evidenced by the Sinai II agreement, that did not align with Syria's. Nixon's opening with Asad allowed Syria and the United States to have formal diplomatic relations from which these two states could cooperate on issues where their interests aligned even if trust between both states had broken down in other areas of concern.

¹ Makdisi, Ussama. *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U.S.–Arab Relations: 1820–2001* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010).

This security cooperation allowed both countries to achieve their security interests in Lebanon with a degree of success. Employing documents from the American archives and interviews with senior Syrian officials, this chapter examines the responses of Syria and the United States to the breakdown of the Lebanese state and the decision-making by both sides in relation to Lebanon's civil war. In particular, it examines the degree of security cooperation between the two states in seeking a resolution to the crisis. Based on archival sources and interviews, this chapter illustrates how the United States brokered a "red line" agreement between Israel and Syria.

This chapter also illustrates that the decision by Syria to use its regular ground forces to intervene militarily in June 1976 was not conditional on a "green light" from the United States, as some historians have argued. Instead, it was based on Syria's own calculations that its interests in Lebanon could not be secured without increasing its military presence in the Lebanese state. Hafiz al-Asad reluctantly intervened in Lebanon as a final option and not, as some historians have argued, as a means of achieving an overall strategic goal in his contestation with Israel after the October War. Asad entered Lebanon without a long-term strategy or vision for the neighbouring state beyond an immediate interest in preserving the Maronite Christian community.

President Ford and Secretary Kissinger initially sought to prevent Syria's intervention, but their change in position once Syria did intervene in June 1976 marked a shift in American policy. Arguably, that change was beyond their control. With Syria's interests aligned with the United States' in preserving the Maronite Christian community, the US accommodated Syria's expansive role in Lebanon. Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's public support for this intervention by 1976 supported this shift in American policy and marked a rare moment in history where both Israel's and Syria's interests in Lebanon were aligned.

Overall, this chapter examines the Syrian and US responses to the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976 and assesses the importance of their security cooperation in achieving their respective interests. This chapter's first section looks at Syria's relations with Lebanon and its confessional groups from the autumn of 1975 to the spring of 1976, as well as the role identity and interests played in shaping Syria's engagement with Lebanon's confessional groups. It illustrates Syria's attempts at political mediation to secure a political settlement in Lebanon. The second section of the chapter examines the US's response to the breakdown of the Lebanese state and subsequently the security cooperation between the US and Syria on Lebanon. It also illustrates why Asad engaged the United States on the deepening crisis in Lebanon by the autumn of 1975, and why the US switched from opposing Syria's full-scale

military intervention in June of 1975 to accepting it as a *fait accompli* by the summer of 1976. Finally, the chapter concludes with an assessment of the two states' policies towards Lebanon. This chapter draws on recently released archival material and primary source interviews with senior decision-makers to better understand this important period in both states' relations.

1.1. Syria's Relations with Lebanon, Autumn 1975 to Spring 1976

1.1.1. Syria's Conception of its Role in Lebanon

Reflective of the broader trends illustrated in this study, both interests and identity shaped how Asad viewed his southern neighbour. The concept of *al-Sham* which once included both Syria and Lebanon, resonated strongly with Hafiz al-Asad. Richard Murphy recalls how Asad always pointed out that, while the actions of the Ottomans and their successors had divided "Greater Syria" politically, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Syria shared "one people." Asad repeatedly made reference to Murphy the injustice of Sykes–Picot Agreement, which in his view had robbed "Greater Syria" of its unity, invoking this common identity in a number of his public comments. Murphy concluded that Asad viewed his involvement in his neighbour's affairs as natural, because both states had links that bound them together around common historical, cultural, economic, and familial ties.²

According to Abdul Halim Khaddam, the introduction of Palestinian refugees to the fragile confessional environment in Lebanon by 1971 further complicated Asad's ideational relationship with Lebanon; their presence in Lebanon threatened the balance of power within the Lebanese political system. Asad found himself faced with two larger, competing ideational interests in the small Lebanese state: the Palestinian community and the Lebanese people.³

In addition to these larger identities, Syria's relationship with Lebanon was further complicated by the number of sub-national Lebanese confessional identities, each of which had differing identities and interests. In Asad's estimations, the Maronite Christian community in particular differed from other groups because they had identity ties with Israel based around their common Judeo-Christian identity.⁴

² Interview with Richard Murphy, New York, July 2013.

³ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam, Paris, August 2012.

⁴ El Khazen, Farid. *The Breakdown of the Lebanese State: 1967–1976* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

These contrasting identities illustrate the difficulty of viewing Syria's relations with Lebanon purely through one ideational lens or a relationship with one single group. To understand the complexity of Syria's role in Lebanon, its relations with these larger and sub-national identities needs to be taken in account. Importantly, Asad often had to weigh decisions where support for one group at the expense of another was both a strategic decision as well as an ideational issue.⁵

Syria's strategic interests had to be taken into account as well and, as Richard Murphy noted, "Hafiz al-Asad was not an adventurer. He was very cautious." The Syrian leader was keenly aware of the limits and opportunities in Syria's strategic environment, and he pursued his foreign policy — as can be seen in the case of the Syrian–Israeli disengagement agreements — with a pragmatism whereby he balanced his state's identity with its interests. This pragmatism did not always succeed in securing Asad's interests, but even from his days as head of the Air Force, Asad, as Richard Murphy observed, was not inclined to take positions that could compromise Syria's territorial integrity.⁶

Noting the impact of the Lebanese Civil War on Syria's stability, in a speech in July 1976 Hafiz al-Asad stressed:

Today we see before us, as a result of joint history and geography and these events, that prior to the events there were approximately a half a million Syrians in Lebanon. . . . At present there are at least a half million Lebanese refugees in Syria. Half a million of our people in Lebanon have come to Syria. A total of approximately 150,000 Palestinians of the brother Palestinians residing in Lebanon have entered Syria. As a result of these events, approximately 1 million people have entered Syria. I think we can imagine the magnitude of the problem caused by the entry of 1 million persons into a country whose population is less than 9 million.⁷

Both Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad, in separate interviews, also noted that Syria had to take into account how this instability in Lebanon could threaten its wider interests in the region, and this factored into Asad's Lebanon policy. First, in relation to Israel, Lebanon proved to be critical to the balance of power in the region according to Abdul Halim Khaddam. If the Lebanese state collapsed and the Maronite Christian community emerged as the clear victor, it could create a space for Israel to further assert its influence in the Levant at the expense of Syria's already vulnerable position after the failure to secure an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in 1975. Rifaat al-Asad noted that building relations with all of the confessional groups in Lebanon proved to be the best safeguard against one group forming exclusive relations with another country at the expense

⁵ Dawisha, Adeed I. *Syria and the Lebanese Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press: 1980).

⁶ Interview with Richard Murphy.

⁷ Speech. 1976, July 10. Given by Hafiz al-Asad.

of Syria. According to Khaddam, Hafiz al-Asad sought to prevent a situation where Israel surrounded Syria on two of its borders whether directly with a military intervention in Lebanon or indirectly with a pro-Israeli government.⁸

Second, the escalation of violence in Lebanon or the collapse of the Lebanese state could lead to the intervention of Israel into Lebanon. A direct military intervention in Lebanon would pose a strategic threat to Syria, with Lebanon geographically acting as a direct corridor from which Israel could attack Syria. With Damascus only 50 miles from Beirut and with the loss of the Golan Heights, Asad, according to both Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad, viewed Lebanon then as a critical fault line for the security of his state. In Asad's estimation, according to Khaddam, Syria would be in too weak of strategic position to contest Israel if Israel controlled both of Syria's borders. According to Rifaat al-Asad, in Hafiz al-Asad's estimation, Israel also importantly would be in an advantageous position to contain Syria's ambitions in the Levant or go as far to overthrow or undermine Asad's government domestically.⁹

Third, the collapse of Lebanon's National Pact could lead to the partition of the Lebanese state. In Asad's estimations, according to Khaddam, such a partition would benefit Israel if the Maronite Christian community established their own, separate state. Managing a number of separate Lebanese states would amplify the security risks along its border — ones that Syria would find it very difficult to contain from spreading across its own borders.¹⁰ Finally, the collapse of Lebanon could lead to the deeper radicalization of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian militant community at the expense of Syria. With backing from both Egypt and Iraq, the Palestinian militant community could change its position at the expense of Syria's perceived leadership of the Palestinians.¹¹

Finally, the conflict between Israel and the PLO in Lebanon added a further dimension to the Arab-Israeli conflict. While that conflict tore at the confessional fabric of Lebanon, it could not be fully opposed by Damascus, which supported the Palestinians struggle for statehood and viewed the Palestinian attacks from Lebanese territory as potentially beneficial to their military struggle with Israel. Therefore, before 1975 Asad tolerated a degree of instability in Lebanon. From his experience with the PLO in Syria and Jordan before he became

⁸ Interview with Samir Frangieh; Interview with Rifaat al-Asad, Paris, August 2012; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam, Paris, August 2012; Rabinovich, Itamar. *The War for Lebanon: 1970-1985*, revised edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁹ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Assad.

¹⁰ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, June 22, 5:00-7:35 pm. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 347, Department of State Memorandum of Conversations, Internal, April-June, 1976.

president, Asad was well aware of their role in creating instability in states.¹² The PLO's use of Lebanon as a staging ground for attacks against Israel after the 1967 war led Israel to launch strikes against the PLO in Lebanese territory. By 1972, Tel Aviv was taking an active military role in retaliating against these Palestinian militants in southern Lebanon.

Contrary to the literature, which has portrayed Hafiz al-Asad's intervention in Lebanon in predominantly hegemonic expansionary terms, Asad never sought such a position in Lebanon.¹³ As this chapter will show, by balancing his competing interests and his ideational alignments Hafiz al-Asad sought to keep the confessional system from splitting apart. Importantly, intervening in the Lebanese state was a decision Asad took reluctantly, after the failure to broker a political settlement between the confessional groups in Lebanon. This broad latticework of interests and identities shaping Syria's conception of its role in Lebanon illustrates the complexity of Syria's position in relation to its neighbour and why one has to be very careful when drawing conclusions.

1.1.2. Syria's Confessional Diplomacy: April–December 1975

Lebanon's fragility had begun to manifest itself more acutely in the growing tensions between the Maronite Christians and the Palestinians by the spring of 1974. Hafiz al-Asad's reluctance to become involved in untangling the knot of political tensions in Lebanon caused Damascus to avoid playing a mediatory role in Lebanese politics until the spring of 1975. However, the eruption of direct violence between the Maronite Christian community and the Palestinian community in April 1975 prompted Asad's first direct attempt to prevent the collapse of the Lebanese political system.¹⁴

Hafiz al-Asad's initial intentions were not to increase Syria's role in the Lebanese state. As Abdul Halim Khaddam notes, President Asad considered Lebanon an "independent, sovereign country," and one that should ideally remain in that form. Hafiz al-Asad sent Khaddam to Lebanon with the mission to seek a political settlement, believing that the system governing Lebanon was profoundly unstable and that it would not serve Syria's interests if one group dominated the political system. Khaddam recalled, "Unfortunately, Lebanon is based on factions and is not based around a common national identity. Our

¹² Rabinovich 1985, Ch. 1–3.

¹³ See, for example: Hiro, Dilip. *Lebanon: Fire and Ember: A History of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993); Deeb, Marius. *Syria's Terrorist War on Lebanon and the Peace Process* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Rubin, Barry. *The Truth About Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁴ Weinberger, Naomi Joy. *Syrian Intervention in Lebanon: The 1975–1976 Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

efforts attempted to move Lebanon from these factional politics to a state based around a common national identity.”¹⁵

Lebanon’s factional politics presented Syria with two political sides that had very little common ground. Lebanon’s political system was split between the Lebanese Left, who became known as the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), and the Lebanese Right, who became known as the Lebanese Front. The Lebanese National Movement consisted predominantly of Kamal Joumblatt’s Progressive Socialist Party (Druze), the Lebanese Communist Party, and Nasserist groups. The PLO, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and other Palestinian groups intermingled with the LNM. The Lebanese Front consisted of former president Camille Chamoun’s National Liberal Party, Pierre Gemayel’s Phalange Party, and President Suleiman Frangieh’s Marada Brigade. It also included the military wing of Gemayel’s Phalange Party, which became the Kataeb Regulatory Forces (KRF). The traditional Sunni political elite, not affiliated with either side, was struggling to identify with either the LNM or the Lebanese Front by the spring of 1975.¹⁶

Lebanon’s political system had begun to face turbulence in 1969, when intense clashes occurred between the Lebanese Army and the PLO. Egypt subsequently brokered an agreement in Cairo between the Lebanese Army and the PLO in which the PLO agreed to respect the sovereignty of the Lebanese Army in exchange for the Army agreeing not to actively interfere in the growing Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. This agreement gave *de facto* control of the Palestinian refugee camps to the PLO, and did not prevent them or other Palestinian militant groups from using Lebanese territory to launch attacks against Israel. By 1971, following the expulsion of PLO leaders and militants from Jordan, the number of people in these camps further swelled, creating — similar to how it had in Jordan — a state within a state in Lebanon.¹⁷

While the Maronite Christian elite had shown sympathy for the struggle of the Palestinians since 1948, Samir Frangieh, a leading Maronite Christian community member, noted that the elite felt threatened by the growing number of Palestinian militants in their country and the impact this growing community was having on the balance of power in the country. Palestinian immigration positioned the Maronite Christian community demographically as a

¹⁵ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

¹⁶ Salibi, Kamal S. *Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958–1976* (Delmar, NY: Caravan, 1976); Najem, Tom. *Lebanon: the Politics of a Penetrated Society* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Abraham, A.J. *The Lebanon War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996).

¹⁷ Cobban, Helena. *The Making of Modern Lebanon* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1985), Ch. 6; El Khazen 2000, Ch. 10.

minority in the country. According to Samir Frangieh, both President Frangieh, his uncle, and Pierre Gemayel's Phalange Party responded to the PLO's growing presence with a re-assertion of the Maronite Christian identity. In addition, a number of Christians who moved to East Beirut from the countryside during the 1970s in search of new work and opportunities became foot soldiers for the KRF and the Marada Brigade.¹⁸

In February 1975, tensions flared up following the Lebanese Army's slaughter of a number of Sunni fishermen protesting over fishery ownership rights in Sidon and along the coast. Protests then spread along the Lebanese coast. The traditional Sunni elite accused the Lebanese Army of acting for the Maronite community against the interests of the Sunni community. In response to these accusations, the Maronite community rallied in their support of the army in East Beirut. On the 28th of February 1975, militants, including Palestinians from the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp, fired on the Lebanese Army as they sought to remove barriers on the road to Sidon erected by protesters. In an attempt to contain the PLO's increasingly frequent disruptions of Lebanese affairs, in March 1975 Damascus proposed a Syrian–Palestinian joint command to better manage the PLO's role in the region. The PLO, however, rejected this idea.¹⁹

As these tensions simmered, on the 13th of April 1975 Palestinian militants opened fire on Pierre Gemayel and a Maronite Christian congregation at a church in Ayn al-Rammana, Beirut. In retaliation, the KRF killed 27 Palestinians travelling through Ayn al-Rammana. In response to this slaughter of Palestinians, Kamal Joumblatt, who was deeply sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle, broke with President Frangieh and supported the Palestinian community. These incidents led to armed clashes breaking out between the predominantly Palestinian community and the KRF, which soon spread throughout Lebanon. The Lebanese Right predominantly supported the KRF, while the Lebanese Left supported the Palestinians. On the 13th of April, in response to the massacre, the LNM met and requested that the KRF be dissolved. This position was also supported by Kamal Joumblatt, who noted in his memoir, that on the 26th of April, he publicly announced that he would not support any government that included the Phalange Party, but his demands were ignored by President Frangieh.²⁰

On the 15th of May 1975, Prime Minister Rashid al-Sulh resigned after the Phalange Party pulled out of the government, citing their objection to Sulh not having used the Army to help

¹⁸ Interview with Samir Frangieh; Cobban 1985, Ch. 6; El Khazen 2000, pp. 107–108.

¹⁹ Cobban 1985, Ch. 6; Salibi 1976, pp. 92–93; Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6.

²⁰ Salibi 1976, Ch. 14; Joumblatt, Kamal. *I Speak for Lebanon*, transcr. Philippe Lapousterle, trans. Michael Pallis (London: Zed Press, 1982).

contain the fighting in April. Deciding that a more decisive course needed to be taken to contain the growing unrest in the state, and also his difficulty in finding a suitable Sunni premier, Frangieh appointed a retired national security officer, Brigadier General Nur al-Din al-Rifa'i, as prime minister. (The Lebanese constitution mandates that the prime minister be a Sunni and the president be a Maronite.) This military government faced deep criticism from the Lebanese Left and the Sunni political elite. The Palestinian resistance, threatened by this government, opposed it as well. The military leadership had a stronger proclivity to suppress the Palestinians than past governments, which had consisted of the more traditional Sunni elite who were more sympathetic to the Palestinians. This new government, however, received support from the Phalange Party and Camille Chamoun, further embittering divisions between the Lebanese Right and the Left.²¹

In Hafiz al-Asad's view, the situation in Lebanon was on the verge of deteriorating further, and it had the potential to spark more clashes between the Lebanese Right and Left, as well as the Palestinians. He therefore decided to intervene more directly in Lebanese politics. To handle the Lebanese portfolio, he assembled a committee of Abdul Halim Khaddam, Major General Naji Jamil (Chief of Staff of the Air Force) and Major General Hikmat Shihabi (Chief of Staff of the Syrian Army). Rifaat al-Asad, commander of the Defence Companies, and Ali Douba, head of Military Intelligence, also informed on the Lebanon policy.²²

On the 24th of May, Khaddam and Naji Jamil visited with President Frangieh in Beirut, urging him to appoint a new government. Syria was concerned that the military government could spark more fighting in Lebanon, but also that it was too anti-Palestinian. They also met with the leaders of the Lebanese Right and the Maronite Patriarch, who supported the new government, in Beirut. On the 25th of May, President Frangieh announced the dissolution of the military government. In its place, he appointed Rashid Karami, a rival of his but a close ally of Damascus, to the premiership. Khaddam subsequently helped Karami broker a compromise agreement on the cabinet acceptable to the Sunni political elite and the Phalange Party on the 28th of June 1975. Both parties expressed their willingness to accommodate one another in the political process.²³

During this period, becoming increasingly disillusioned with the viability of the confessional system, the Maronite Christian leadership also raised the prospect of partition as a solution to the on-going violence in Lebanon. The Maronite Christian community and the Sunni community in northern Lebanon increasingly resorted to violence towards one another. With

²¹ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6; Salibi 1976, Ch. 15.

²² Interviews with Rifaat al-Assad and Abdul Halim Khaddam; Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6.

²³ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6; Dawisha 1980, pp. 67–96.

the fighting getting worse, President Frangieh's son, Tony Frangieh, formed his pro-Maronite militia, the "Zgharta Liberation Army," to ensure his community's security in this area, the political base of the Frangieh family.²⁴

Even though this violence continued in the north, the summer of 1975 represented a rare lull in the civil war in other respects. After a meeting with President Frangieh, on the 25th of June Yasir Arafat re-affirmed his commitment to the Cairo agreement and promised that the Palestinian resistance would refrain from interfering in Lebanese domestic politics. Arafat wrote to President Asad, expressing gratitude for Syria's role in "preserving Lebanese-Palestinian fraternity" and praising Syria's role in these negotiations, stating that they "confirmed Syria's vanguard role under your wise leadership." Arafat was keen to show Asad that the Palestinian Resistance would support Syria's mediatory efforts. Recognizing Syria's role in preserving the Palestinian position in the Lebanese state, Arafat sought to avoid a situation where he was in direct confrontation with Syria.²⁵ Hoping to decrease the tensions between the Maronites and the Lebanese Left, Khaddam invited the Christian political leadership to visit Damascus. On the 1st of August, Prime Minister Karami also visited Damascus for talks aimed at resolving the civil war.²⁶

Alongside the mediation efforts, during these months Damascus also took steps to better protect the Palestinian community against its opponent in the Lebanese state, the Maronite Christian militias. Syria's As-Sa'iqa provided military equipment and tactical support against the KRF. Asad was concerned that the Christian militias could strengthen their position in the state at the expense of the Palestinian community.²⁷

September, however, shattered the relative calmness as violence escalated in Tripoli and 3,000 Sunni militiamen from the northern city headed to Zgharta to confront Tony Frangieh's militia. In response to this growing confrontation in northern Lebanon, on the 9th of September Camille Chamoun, who then served as the interior minister, called on Prime Minister Karami to deploy the Army. As a compromise, and in defiance of Kamal Joublatt, Prime Minister Karami agreed to deploy the army if General Ghanim, who was more sympathetic to the Maronite Christian position, was replaced. Karami hoped that the deployment of the army as a buffer between Tripoli and Zgharta would prevent further violence. However, the Army's perceived impartial role was shattered on the 14th of September, when it killed twelve members of a Sunni political organization in Tripoli. Their

²⁴ Ibid; Salibi 1976, Ch. 14; Interview with Samir Frangieh.

²⁵ Dawisha 1980, p. 88.

²⁶ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6.

²⁷ Ibid.

role also was opposed by the predominantly Sunni Tripoli city leadership after Kamal Joumblatt's LNM urged them to oppose any role for the Army in northern Lebanon. Joumblatt was concerned such a move would empower the army at the cost of the LNM's political and military position in Lebanon.²⁸

Rejecting the army's deployment to Tripoli, Kamal Joumblatt, noting in his memoir, urged the LNM to initiate a nationwide strike against the Lebanese premiership. On the 17th of September 1975, in a further escalation of violence, the KRF, along with Chamoun's militia, al-Numur, and another armed militia, Hurras al-Arz, launched an attack on the centre of Beirut. The KRF, according to Joumblatt, hoped that this heavy destruction of Beirut would lead to an intervention by the Lebanese Army, which would, in their estimations, benefit their position in the state in relation to the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinian Resistance.²⁹

In an effort to stabilize Tripoli, on the 12th of September 1975 Prime Minister Karami asked the Palestinian Resistance to help secure the city. Zuhayr Muhsin, head of the Palestinian Saqa'a and the PLO's military committee, was sent to Tripoli. With a limited number of Palestinian Resistance fighters in northern Lebanon, Muhsin requested Karami's permission for two Palestinian brigades to cross from Syria to help reinforce his efforts to stabilize Tripoli. Prime Minister Karami approved this request without getting permission from either his Cabinet or President Frangieh. President Frangieh called President Asad to protest this decision, and Asad then agreed to withdraw the Palestinian brigades from Tripoli.³⁰

In the midst of this increasing civil conflict, President Asad, according to both Khaddam and Rifaat al-Assad, sought to initiate a more expansive diplomatic initiative, which started on the 19th of September. President Asad expanded his Lebanon portfolio advisory committee to include Zuhayr Muhsin and Muhammed al-Khuli, the chief of security in the Syrian Air Force. Khaddam and Shihabi were sent to Lebanon to stabilize the situation. On the 20th of September 1975, a Syria-sponsored ceasefire to halt the fighting was reached in Beirut.³¹

In attempt to prevent a return to violence, Khaddam proposed a Committee for National Dialogue. He initiated a series of consultations with the various political factions in Lebanon to try to reformulate the National Pact so that it was more reflective of Lebanon's changing demographics. Khaddam, who viewed President Frangieh as a close friend of Damascus,

²⁸ Joumblatt 1982, Ch. 18–20.

²⁹ Joumblatt 1982, Ch. 19–20.

³⁰ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6.

³¹ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Assad; Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6.

recalled that he hoped that this solution would create a Lebanese political system based first and foremost around a common national identity that could transcend confessional politics. This goal would be achieved by reforming the Constitution and the electoral law. Debate emerged between the different groups on who should be a member of this Committee for National Dialogue, however. Kamal Joumlatt, recalled in his memoir, that he objected to Khaddam's initial formula of basing representation on confessional identity in order to achieve representation for all of Lebanon's confessional groups, and instead proposed that the current political blocs choose representatives. Khaddam was able to reach a compromise, with 20 members — 6 from the Lebanese Left — and Joumlatt recognizing the Phalange Party's place in the dialogue.³² Khaddam publicly declared this initiative “a crowning [achievement] on the path of deepening confidence between the different parties.”³³

However, Lebanon's political factions did not come to any agreement by the 11th of November, the deadline set by the ceasefire in September. Indeed, their quarrels and animosities had only played themselves out further in the weeks after the ceasefire. October had marked a return to intense fighting in Lebanon. The LNM and the KRF engaged in street battles in Beirut, which led to the partition of Beirut between East and West, with a scar of rubble and violence separating the two. In the midst of the fighting, both sides sought to cleanse the other's territory of the presence of opposing confessional groups. Fighting also occurred in Damur, to the south of Beirut, and in Zahleh, in the eastern part of the Beqaa Valley. The Lebanese state, torn by these differences, crumbled.³⁴

Watching their mediation efforts flounder, Asad and Khaddam continued to seek a political solution to the crisis. In a meeting in Damascus in October, Prime Minister Karami met with Arafat, Asad, and Khaddam to discuss a way to break through this deadlock. Karami raised the possibility that he could deploy the army to restore order, but he did not think such a deployment would be advisable at that time. He also offered to resign. Asad and Khaddam noted their own objections to the use of the Army, and also to Karami's resignation. They also opposed the use of the Lebanese Army, because it could empower the Maronites at the expense of the Palestinians, and in the meeting Asad noted their predominant concern — above and beyond the LNM's proposals — was the protection of the Palestinian community. Asad noted to Karami and Arafat:

We believe that the National Movement . . . should give priority in its patriotic and national struggle to the defense of the Resistance, and that it should place this as [its] first objective, before the realization of the demands for political, economic, and social

³² Joumlatt 1982, Ch. 3–5; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

³³ Weinberger 1986, p. 107.

³⁴ Cobban 1985, Ch. 6; Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6.

reform of the Lebanese regime. For it is possible to realize some of these demands at present time, and to continue the struggle for their realization during the coming years. However, the matter depends on the Lebanese National Movement itself.³⁵

Arafat left the meeting confident of Asad's support, and on the 29th of October he informed Karami that the Resistance would help bring stability to West Beirut. Khaddam told Karami that Syria supported these efforts. Working with Khaddam, Karami created a Higher Coordination Committee comprising the Army and the Ministry of the Interior, as well as Palestinian militias, to calm inter-communal conflict and better enforce the past ceasefire agreements.³⁶

While violence lessened somewhat in the month of November, by December, fighting had flared up again in Zahleh, Tripoli, and Zgharta. On the 6th of December, as Pierre Gemayel was in Damascus, four KRF members were killed in East Beirut. In response to these assassinations, on "Black Saturday" Maronite Christian militiamen killed 200 Muslim civilians. In response, Nasserite leader Ibrahim Qulaylat, who was allied with the LNM, launched an assault on central Beirut, driving the KRF from the hotels captured during the "Battle of Hotels" in October 1975. The LNM also attacked a Maronite Christian village in the Beqaa Valley. In response, the KRF assaulted Muslim villages in the vicinity of Beirut.³⁷

Syrian mediation failed to stem this violence. Asad and Khaddam were unable to build enough trust between the confessional groups to achieve a permanent ceasefire, and by the end of 1975 none of the parties had committed to a peaceful settlement. While Damascus did indeed prioritize the protection of the Palestinian community and, to a degree, the LNM, they recognized that supporting those groups alone would not secure Lebanon's stability and security and, as a result, Syria's security. As both Abdul Halim Khaddam and Richard Murphy noted, Asad was not seeking to escalate Syria's involvement in Lebanon, but was looking for a political solution to avoid a situation where Syria would be drawn militarily in Lebanon's civil war.³⁸

1.1.3. Engagement with the Maronites

With the mediation efforts struggling, in December 1975 Hafiz al-Asad invited Pierre Gemayel, the leader of the Lebanese Phalange Party, to Damascus to meet with him and Abdul Halim Khaddam. News of this visit surprised Syria's Leftist allies and the PLO in Lebanon, who believed Syria was attentive exclusively to their interests. Asad reportedly

³⁵ Weinberger 1986, p. 172.

³⁶ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6.

³⁷ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 6; Salibi 1976, Ch. 21; Cobban 1985, p. 131.

³⁸ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Richard Murphy.

told Gemayel that Syria would offer “every possible service” and re-affirmed Syria’s mediatory role. Importantly, Asad stressed to Gemayel that Syria should be regarded as “a friend of all Lebanese without exception.” He encouraged the Phalange to not seek a partition of the country, and also encouraged the party to support the confessional system he was trying to preserve. In that meeting, Gemayel stressed to Asad the positive role Syria could play in bringing an end to the conflict. He noted that he did not oppose the Palestinian Resistance, but was concerned by their “excess and involvement in internal Lebanese affairs.” Asad used this meeting to build stronger relations with the wider Maronite Christian community and to send a message to the LNM and the PLO that the pursuit of Syria’s interests in Lebanon would not be constrained by its relationship with any one confessional group. This meeting marked the beginning of a dialogue between Damascus and the Phalange to form closer relations.³⁹

Gemayel’s KRF was the strongest Maronite Christian militia in the civil war, and thus was an important actor in Lebanese politics. In his forty years as leader of the Phalange Party, Gemayel established himself as one of the predominant Maronite Christian powerbrokers. His support base was found predominantly among the Christian youth population in Lebanon, we were disenchanted with mainstream Maronite Christian politics. As the civil war escalated, however, Gemayel became increasingly concerned about the survival of the Maronite Christian community.⁴⁰

He therefore looked to an outside state for more support, but his party was split between those who preferred to deepen ties with Israel and those who saw Syria as a potential ally. Historically, the Phalange Party had reservations about Syria’s role in Lebanon and Damascus’ conception of a “Greater Syrian” identity for the two states. The party considered Lebanon’s independence as a distinct state a critical part of its platform, and the prospect of aligning with Syria could potentially threaten Lebanon’s independence. However, while Israel supplied weapons to Maronite Christian militias from the early days of the war, this effort was noticeably less visible than Syria’s prominent role in the state. Gemayel concluded that, to preserve his community, he needed to improve relations with Damascus. In his estimation, while an increased Syrian presence in the long term threatened his state’s future independence, his community’s survival was at stake.⁴¹

³⁹ Weinberger 1986, p. 173–174; El Khazen 2000, Ch. 24; Transcript from an unidentified story in Lebanese daily *Al-Nahar*.

⁴⁰ Rabinovich 1985, pp. 60–74; Salibi 1976, Ch. 21; Avi-Ran, Reuven. *The Syrian Involvement in Lebanon since 1975* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 37–42.

⁴¹ Rabinovich 1985, pp. 60–74.

While Hafiz al-Asad and Khaddam were engaged in their mediatory effort, by 1975 Rifaat al-Asad had begun to covertly arm and equip members of the Christian militias. Rifaat had a number of friends within the Maronite Christian community, and he felt he could not let his friends be slaughtered as the violence erupted in 1975. In an interview conducted in 2012, he noted as a particular concern that if Syria did not protect this minority community, the Maronites would be forced to flee Lebanon due to the violence.⁴²

Samir Frangieh, Suleiman Frangieh's nephew, observed that Suleiman Frangieh was initially inclined to look more to Israel than Syria for support, but Tony, a recipient of Rifaat's military aid and his business partner, pushed his father to seek assistance from the Syrians, instead of relying on assistance from the Israelis. Suleiman Frangieh, according to Samir Frangieh, concluded that political mediation by Syria was essential to guaranteeing his presidency. Khaddam noted that Frangieh was also a good friend of Hafiz al-Asad.⁴³

In an effort to build closer ties with the Maronite Christian community, Rifaat al-Asad visited Lebanon in December 1975. According to Samir Frangieh, in meetings with members of the Maronite Christian leadership, he encouraged them to align with Syria, and promised that Syria would ensure their safety. He also expressed his concern about the formation of a Maronite–Israeli alliance and sought to dissuade the community from seeking Israeli support in the civil war.⁴⁴

But Syria's role in Lebanon was not welcomed by every leader of the Maronite Christian community. During Gemayel's visit to Damascus, rumours swirled in Beirut that members of Christian militias who opposed Gemayel's engagement with Asad purposely provoked inter-communal fighting aimed at derailing Gemayel's visit.⁴⁵ Vocal opposition to this role came from Raymond Eddé. He believed the Christian community should work with the other confessional groups to preserve Lebanon's unity as a state, and not look to Syria for support. Camille Chamoun was also very reluctant to welcome an increased Syrian role in Lebanon and distrusted Syria's intentions, but eventually changed his position to back his political ally, Suleiman Frangieh. The Guardian of the Cedars, a radical Maronite militia that operated in Beirut, believed Israel was a better ally for guaranteeing the Maronite Christian

⁴² Interview with Rifaat al-Asad.

⁴³ Interviews with Samir Frangieh and Abdul Halim Khaddam; Rabinovich 1985, pp. 60–74.

⁴⁴ Interview with Samir Frangieh.

⁴⁵ Salibi 1976, Ch. 20.

community's future in the long term, but they were not opposed to a Syrian role in Lebanon in the short term if it ensured the protection of their community.⁴⁶

The Phalange Party also was not completely unified on supporting a Syrian role in Lebanon. Conservatives in the party believed ensuring Lebanon's independence was more important. Gemayel's sons were also split on which outside state to back. Amin Gemayel agreed with his father, and considered his community's future could be ensured by forming better relations with Lebanon's other communities and its Arab neighbours. Bashir Gemayel, on the other hand, believed that the survival of his community rested on building better ties with Israel and the United States. However, despite these differences of opinion, the Phalange remained supportive of their leader's position.⁴⁷

According to Samir Frangieh, while there was opposition within the community to better relations with Syria, Pierre Gemayel's and Suleiman Frangieh's willingness to engage their northern neighbour represented the growing opinion within the Maronite Christian community that Syria was needed to ensure their community's survival. Damascus also recognized that a stronger relationship with the Maronite Christian community could serve as a counter-balance to the Lebanese Left and the PLO, and could also prevent the Maronite Christian community from calling in desperation for an Israeli intervention in Lebanon or for partitioning the state.⁴⁸

1.1.4. Syria's More Assertive Posture: December 1975–May 1976

The early months of 1976 proved critical to Asad's decision to move beyond pure mediation and seek a more active posture. Despite Gemayel's and Frangieh's deepening relations with Damascus, the Christian community continued their campaign against the LNM and the Palestinians. While willing to improve relations with and engage Damascus in reaching a political settlement, Gemayel was not going to put all of his faith in Syria to safeguard their position in Lebanon. Gemayel and other Christian leaders, including Camille Chamoun, still sought to militarily alter the balance of power on the ground in order to secure their interests in Lebanon. For the KRF and other Christian militias, East Beirut's Palestinian refugee camps proved problematic because they blocked connections between Beirut and the Maronite Christian communities in the countryside. So, on the 4th of January 1976 and against Syria's wishes, the KRF laid conquest to the refugee camps in Tall al-Za'tar and Jisr al-Basha. On the 13th of January, the militia also assaulted the Palestinian refugee camp of

⁴⁶ Rabinovich 1985, pp. 60–74.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview with Samir Frangieh; Rabinovich 1985, pp. 60–74.

al-Dubayya. The National Liberal Forces and the KRF also launched attacks on the Muslim neighbourhoods of al-Karantina, al-Maslakh, and al-Nab'a.⁴⁹

As this fighting occurred, on the 13th of January the Maronite Christian community leadership met at the Presidential Palace, where President Frangieh and the Christian leadership declared that they would protect the Lebanese from the Palestinians at all costs. In response to this meeting and the on-going violence, Prime Minister Karami, Kamal Jomblatt, and leaders of the Lebanese Left affirmed their commitment to protecting the Palestinians. They announced that they would seek to prevent the Christians from partitioning Lebanon.⁵⁰

On the 18th of January, the Christian militias slaughtered 1,000 Muslims and Palestinians in the al-Karnatina neighbourhood alone. Worried for his community's survival, Yasir Arafat authorized the entire Palestinian Resistance, including the PLO-Fatah units, to take part in fighting against the Maronite Christians, effectively aligning the Palestinian militias operating in Lebanon with the LNM in response to this series of attacks on their neighbourhood. In response to the Christian massacres, the LNM and the Palestinians launched an assault on Damur, a Christian village south of Beirut and the home of the Chamoun clan. Intensified fighting spread quickly throughout the country. Unable to bring an end to the fighting, Prime Minister Karami announced his resignation on the 18th of January 1976.⁵¹

In response to this violence and the resignation of Karami, Khaddam warned, "This is a very sensitive situation in relation to us in Syria, and in relation to the presence of the Palestinian resistance there."⁵² While Asad sought to deepen his ties with the Maronite Christian community, he objected equally to the Christian community's onslaught of violence and their refusal to stop the fighting. Trying to prevent a massacre of Palestinians, an important aspect of Syria's identity, and contain the Maronite Christians' indiscriminate violence, Asad shifted from employing only political mediation to using limited force as well. The Syrian president sought to avoid a situation where one group could shift the balance of power too far in their favour at the expense of another group. Syria's Saqa'a and PLA units entered Lebanon in the beginning of January and assisted the Palestinians in their counter-offensive. They also assisted Sunni militiamen in attacking Christian towns in the northern Akkar region. In a warning to the Christians, Khaddam declared, "We have made it clear in

⁴⁹ Abraham 1996, Ch. 3; Cobban 1985, Ch. 6; Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; Salibi 1976, Ch. 23.

⁵⁰ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7.

⁵¹ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; Abraham 1996, Ch. 3

⁵² Newspaper Article, 8 January 1976, *Al Nahar*, in Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7.

a decisive manner that we would not permit the partition of Lebanon. Any initiative for partition would mean our immediate intervention. For Lebanon was part of Syria and we would restore it with any attempt at partition.”⁵³

Facing difficulty with the LNM–PLO siege of Damur, Kamal Joublatt asked for more Syrian assistance. Asad hesitated over deepening his involvement in Syria. Khaddam, however, warned that if he did not increase Syrian assistance, the Maronite Christians’ January offensive could lead to them capturing the Muslim neighbourhoods in West Beirut. While Asad was willing to deploy Syria’s trained Palestinian militias to prevent the Maronite Christians from overwhelming the Palestinians and the LNM, on the 18th of January Asad first sought another cease-fire, hoping to prevent escalating his involvement in the state even more. Asad wanted to avoid as much as possible a sustained military role in Lebanon and a situation where he tilted the balance of power too much in favour of the LNM and the Palestinians. Much to Asad’s consternation, the ceasefire was broken almost immediately upon implementation.⁵⁴

Forced to escalate his country’s involvement, Asad deployed 3,500 militants from the Syrian-backed Palestinian Liberation Army’s Yarmuk Brigade to the Beqaa Valley to assist the LNM and the Palestinian Resistance. This deployment allowed the LNM and the Palestinian Resistance to turn the tide against the Maronites. They launched attacks on a number of Maronite strongholds, including Zahleh and Zgharta, resulting in substantial gains to the detriment of the Maronite Christian community.⁵⁵

In a conversation on the 20th of January 1976, Frangieh protested to Asad, “There are Syrian forces entering Lebanon!” Asad rejoined, “There is a red line in relation to the Palestinians that we will absolutely not permit anyone to cross.”⁵⁶ Khaddam declared on the 1st of February 1976 that “if the PLA had not intervened, Lebanon would now be devouring itself and be destroyed.”⁵⁷ Seeking a ceasefire once again, President Frangieh and Asad agreed that Khaddam, Shihabi, and Jamil would visit Beirut to broker a ceasefire.⁵⁸

Building on Syria’s failed National Dialogue, President Asad still hoped he could refashion the Lebanese political system and bring it stability. Abdul Halim Khaddam proposed the “Constitutional Document” as a solution. The proposal sought to re-shape the political

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; El Khazen 2000, pp. 325–327.

⁵⁵ Ibid; Abraham 1996, Ch. 3.

⁵⁶ Weinberger 1986, p. 184.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; El Khazen 2000, Ch. 24.

system to account for the demographic shifts in the country and to give more power to the Muslim population. Importantly, the Document proposed re-allocating how seats would be assigned in Parliament to give more representation to the Muslim community. It also proposed new institutional structures to build more checks and balances into the political system. It re-orientated the civil service from one where appointments were made based on sectarian affiliation to one based on merit. However, the Document also made concessions to the Maronite Christian community to protect their interests in the state. Khaddam recalled that, after long negotiations, he convinced President Frangieh to accept the Document on the 14th of February 1976.⁵⁹

However, the Document faced opposition from Kamal Joumlatt, who believed that the reforms the Syrians advocated both went against his wider positions on remaking the confessional system along non-sectarian lines, and also gave more power to the traditional Sunni elite at the expense of his political interests. In spite of Joumlatt's opposition, his LNM coalition was split on whether to support the Document, with the prominent Shi'a leader Musa al-Sadr and several secular Leftist pro-Syrian groups who were affiliated with the LNM endorsing the Syrian Document. Joumlatt believed the Document further enshrined Syria's role in Lebanon, which he hoped to limit.⁶⁰

The Palestinian Resistance also had reservations about the Constitutional Document, believing the proposal did not go far enough to recognize and protect their position in the Lebanese state. In a concession to Asad, Frangieh agreed to Arafat's request that his community have a recognized position in the state. However, the PFLP completely rejected it, refusing to accommodate a proposal that did not completely change the balance of power in the state in favour of their Leftist allies. Although Asad accused them of acting against their own self-interest, the Palestinian Resistance refused to accept the Document. Joumlatt's and the Palestinians' obstruction, as a result, foiled Asad's effort at mediation.⁶¹

As the Constitutional Document negotiations were falling apart, dissension could no longer be contained in the Lebanese Army, with confessional interests tearing apart its ranks. In response to the Lebanese Air Force bombing an LNM material re-supply corridor in January, Lt. Ahmad al-Khatib announced his own army, the Lebanese Arab Army (LAA). To try to preserve the state army, Asad formed a Syrian–Lebanese–Palestinian Higher Military Committee to help better resolve confessional differences in the forces. To support

⁵⁹ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam; Weinberger 1986, pp. 184–192; El Khazen 2000, pp. 327–332.

⁶⁰ Joumlatt 1982, p. 74; Weinberger 1986, pp. 184–192; El Khazen 2000, pp. 327–332.

⁶¹ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; El Khazen 2000, pp. 327–332.

this initiative, President Frangieh gave it authority over all internal and defence forces of the Lebanese state.⁶²

This mechanism for managing tensions within the army failed. On the 10th of March, a group of Muslim soldiers took over their barracks and declared their allegiance to Lt. Ahmad al-Khatib. To calm the situation, Syria suggested that President Frangieh offer amnesty. Frangieh rejected the idea, and this forced Khaddam to return to Beirut. The next day, the 11th of March, Gen. Sziz al-Ahdab announced a military coup from his garrison in Damascus. He immediately demanded that President Frangieh schedule new presidential elections. This resulted in the splintering of the army along confessional lines, with Muslim soldiers becoming members of the LAA. Christian soldiers joined Maronite Christian militias. With the internal security skeleton of the state shattered, Syria was left with few options to save the Lebanese political system. The breakdown of the Lebanese Army deepened Asad's antipathy towards Joumlatt, who had not only helped foil the Constitutional Document, but also, in Asad's estimation, played a role in tearing apart the Army. Further angering Asad, on the 15th of March Joumlatt and Lt. Khatib met and entered into an alliance.⁶³

In response to the military coup, on the 13th of March Lebanon's Chamber of Deputies voted overwhelmingly to call on President Frangieh to tender his resignation. President Frangieh immediately rebuffed these demands. The next day, Joumlatt called for a "military solution" and deployed the LNM militias and the LAA to assault the Presidential Palace in Beirut. Joumlatt hoped to force the president to step down. President Frangieh immediately called for President Asad's assistance. As a compromise to the LNM, Frangieh agreed to hold early elections if President Asad would allow him to stay in power until they were held. To protect Frangieh and the Lebanese political system, Asad sent in Syrian Army regulars camouflaged as the Saqa'a, along with the PLA, to guard the Presidential Palace. However, this protection could not contain fighting between the LNM and the LAA and KRF. On the 23rd of March 1976, the Presidential Palace in Beirut was bombed and Frangieh was forced to move out of Beirut.⁶⁴

1.1.5. Breaking with the LNM

⁶² Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7.

⁶³ Ibid; El Khazen 2000, pp. 332–336.

⁶⁴ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; El Khazen 2000, pp. 340–341; Joumlatt 1982, Ch. 5; Abraham 1996, Ch. 3.

Joumlatt's obstruction of the Constitutional Document, his support of the break-up of the army, and his military campaign against Frangieh and Syrian forces all culminated in Hafiz al-Asad's moving to break his ties with Kamal Joumlatt and the LNM. In light of the attack on the Presidential Palace, Arafat suggested that Asad meet with Joumlatt to try to salvage the relationship. Asad asked Arafat, "Why should we meet with him, when he insists on renewed fighting?" Arafat suggested that Joumlatt would be more reasonable in private.⁶⁵

In a seven-hour meeting with Joumlatt on the 27th of March that would mark the rupture between Syria and the LNM, Asad pressed Joumlatt on his intransigence in supporting Syria's mediatory process and reminded him of Syria's support for the LNM. He objected to Joumlatt's undermining of his peace initiatives and accused Joumlatt of attempting to force Frangieh's resignation. Joumlatt objected to this assessment, noting he hoped to create a secular state in Lebanon not based on confessional identity. Asad responded to Joumlatt by pointing out that the traditional Sunni elite had objected to such a move. Joumlatt then rebuffed Asad's assessment of the Lebanese political situation and Syria's vision for Lebanon. President Asad concluded that Joumlatt had no interest in peace on Syria's terms, but rather a solution driven by war and his antipathies toward the Maronite Christian community. Even though he had been closer to the LNM since the beginning of the civil war, Asad concluded that he could not work with them any longer.⁶⁶

After this meeting, Syria served its ties with the LNM and began to actively support the Maronite Christian community. After his positive meeting with Gemayel in December 1975 and with his state's deepening ties with the Frangieh clan, by the end of March Asad had come to the conclusion that the Maronite Christian community, which supported the Constitutional Document, was more willing than the LNM to support Syria's mediatory role in resolving the crisis in Lebanon. Asad also recognized that if he did not take steps to curtail the LNM's obstruction of his peace process, the Christian community could turn to Israel for support. Ironically, only a month earlier the Syrian president had launched a military incursion against the Maronite Christians' military positions in response to their assault on the Palestinian community in Lebanon. On the 1st of April, the Information Office of the Ba'th Party accused Joumlatt of being "the spurious King of the Left."⁶⁷ Syria accused Joumlatt of being driven more by conflict than by a desire for peace and stability in Lebanon. On the 12th of April, Asad declared: "We in this country, Muslims and Christians, are prepared to move into Lebanon to protect every oppressed person without

⁶⁵ Speech. 1976, July 20. Given by Hafiz al-Asad.

⁶⁶ Joumlatt 1982, Ch. 5; Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; El Khazen 2000, pp. 342–344; Seale, Patrick. *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988), Ch. 17.

⁶⁷ Newspaper article, 1 April 1976, *Al-Nahar*, in Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7

regard to his religious affiliation. . . . [W]e in this region possess complete freedom of movement, and we are able to take positions which we believe in without anyone being able to prevent us from taking these positions.”⁶⁸

On the 9th of April 1976, Asad deployed the Saqa’a and Syrian ground forces to Lebanon. To undercut the LNM’s positions, they reinforced Christian militias in Zahleh and established a base west of Shtura. The Syrian Navy launched a blockade of the ports of Tripoli and Sidon to cut off the LNM’s supplies. A ceasefire between the LNM and the Christians was announced the day after Syria’s entry into Lebanon.⁶⁹

Undermining Joumblatt’s position further, Asad used an address on the 19th of April to warn the Palestinians against remaining associated with the LNM. In a meeting with Arafat on the 28th of March, in an effort to separate the Palestinian Resistance from the LNM, Asad had chided Arafat: “I cannot imagine what connection there is between fighting by Palestinians on the highest mountains in Lebanon and the liberation of Palestine.” Asad also equated the Palestinians’ actions in Lebanon to what they had done in Jordan in 1970.⁷⁰ In an effort to assure Asad that the Resistance would not be associated with the LNM, on the 1st of April 1976 Arafat commended Asad for his mediatory diplomacy. On the 15th, Arafat and Asad agreed a seven-point accord between the Resistance and Syria. It stipulated “a united position against any party that would begin a resumption of the combat activities” in Lebanon. Asad and Arafat both agreed to work to prevent any further escalation of fighting in Lebanon.⁷¹

Further tensions emerged between Syria and the LNM in May 1976. After much delay due to the violence, on the 8th of May, under Syrian armed protection, parliament voted to elect a new president of Lebanon to succeed Suleiman Frangieh, choosing Syrian ally Illiyas Sarkis. Joumblatt, however, objected to Sarkis’ election, and new political tensions grew between the LNM and the Maronite Christians over the result. To complicate matters further, after having previously agreed to step down after new elections were held, President Frangieh stated that he would not step down after the vote, but instead serve his full term, which would end in September. According to Khaddam, Asad accepted Frangieh’s decision in light of the turbulent political environment and his own personal trust in Frangieh.⁷²

⁶⁸ Newspaper article, 13 April 1976, *Al-Nahar*, in Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7

⁶⁹ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; El Khazen 2000, pp. 343–344.

⁷⁰ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7.

⁷¹ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; Speech. 1976, July 20. Given by Hafiz al-Asad.

⁷² Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam; Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; El Khazen, pp. 344–345.

Soon after the elections, fighting broke out again between the LNM and LAA and the Maronite Christians. Syria's paramilitary forces assisted the Maronite Christians and, at times, acted as a force in separating the fighters to try to prevent an escalation of violence. Despite Arafat's previous promise that his forces would not engage in fighting in Lebanon, in some cases Syria's Palestinian forces also fought against rejectionist Palestinian forces. Tensions between Asad and Arafat were thus exacerbated. While Asad objected to Arafat's violation of their April agreement, Arafat objected to the PLA's presence in Lebanon independent of his command. To weaken the LNM and LAA further, the Syrian military tightened their land and sea blockade of the LNM and LAA's material support. The Syrian-controlled PLA and Saqa'a also expanded their influence in the country and orchestrated assassinations of political leaders who opposed Asad's peace initiatives.⁷³

Syria's more assertive posture failed to produce any further stability in Lebanon by May 1976. With the rejection of the Constitution Document, Syria had concluded that a negotiated political settlement was not feasible without it first assuming a more direct military role in Lebanon. Asad hoped that by supporting the Maronite Christian community and by discouraging the Palestinians from engaging in fighting, and thereby weakening the LNM, he could effectively isolate the LNM and create conditions more amenable to a peace agreement. However, Syria's military action had failed to de-escalate the violence — in some cases it had exacerbated the tensions.⁷⁴ Asad's engagement with the United States from the autumn of 1975 to the spring of 1976 is important to examine in order to understand Asad's decision to fully intervene militarily in June 1976.

1.2. The US and Syria find Common Ground in Lebanon

1.2.1. America's Quiet Diplomacy: Autumn 1975 through Spring 1976

At height of Henry Kissinger's Sinai II diplomacy, Lebanon's civil war and its impact on US diplomatic efforts in the Middle East became a particular concern. Kissinger recognized Lebanon's structural crisis as early as 1973, when tensions between the PLO and the Lebanese army flared up. Discussing this period in his memoir, Kissinger noted that unlike Eisenhower in 1958 — when the United States decided to actively intervene in Lebanon to salvage the National Pact and preserve the Lebanese Right in their position of power — Nixon and his successor, Gerald Ford, were in no mood to expend the same amount of resources on the fractious politics of Lebanon. Confronted with the wider challenges in the

⁷³ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7.

⁷⁴ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7; Abraham 1996, Ch. 3; Cobban 1985, Ch. 6; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

Middle East, the withdrawal from Vietnam, and their global competition with the Soviet Union, Kissinger concluded that Lebanon's ills were ones on which neither President Nixon nor President Ford were prepared to expend substantial political capital to address. Kissinger observed that Ford in particular was in a much-weakened position domestically in the wake of Watergate, and his administration was not in a position to contemplate a military intervention in the Middle East.⁷⁵

Kissinger concluded that it was not in America's interests to disentangle Lebanon from its civil war. In meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group on the 10th of October 1975, he outlined the basic tenets of his Lebanon policy: "I want to define our own interests. I have no particular interest in Lebanon's internal affairs if they do not involve outside countries. I don't want us involved in their internal affairs. Our concern is to prevent outside interference."⁷⁶ Through the autumn of 1975 and early spring of 1976, Kissinger repeatedly pushed back against any suggestions that the United States should take an active mediatory role in bringing an end to the civil war.⁷⁷

Instead of becoming involved in Lebanon's internal affairs, Kissinger concluded that the US's interests would best be served if he could keep Israel and its neighbours from intervening militarily in Lebanon. Noting the importance of Sinai II in his calculations, at that 10th October Washington Special Actions Group meeting the secretary asked, "What if Syria, then Israel goes in? Do you think the Sinai agreement can last?"⁷⁸ Kissinger believed that if Israel or Syria intervened in Lebanon, it could draw the region back into war. It could also draw in the Soviet Union, which Kissinger had sought to effectively exclude from the Middle East after 1973. For Kissinger, then, preventing Lebanon's civil war from again drawing Israel and its neighbours into conflict was more important than seeking a resolution of the civil war.⁷⁹

As early as the autumn of 1974, Israel began to express its concern to the United States about the safety of the Maronite community. With the escalation of the civil war and at the request of members of the Maronite Christian community, Israel began to provide financial and military support to the Christian militias. In a conversation with Kissinger on the 24th of

⁷⁵ Kissinger, Henry A. *Years of Upheaval*, reprint edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), Ch. 33.

⁷⁶ Minutes. 1975, October 10, 10:40–11:10 am. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. Ford Library, NSC Institutional Files, Box 25, Meeting Minutes, WSAG-Originals, October 1975.

⁷⁷ Minutes. 1975, October 28, 8 a.m. Secretary of State's Staff Meeting. National Archives, RG 59, Henry Kissinger Staff Meetings, Box 9.

⁷⁸ Minutes. 1975, October 10, 10:40–11:10 am. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. Ford Library, NSC Institutional Files, Box 25, Meeting Minutes, WSAG-Originals, October 1975.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

September 1975, Israeli Foreign Minister Yigal Allon warned the US of the potential ramifications of the break-up of the National Pact and the emergence of a Muslim-dominated state that might be a threat to Israel's interests.⁸⁰ While Israel was not prepared to intervene militarily in Syria in autumn 1975, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin warned Washington that if Syria did intervene, Israel would be forced to do so as well. From a strategic standpoint, Syria controlling or entering territory on Israel's borders threatened Israel's national security. Rabin also sought to prevent President Asad from establishing a government in Lebanon which could empower the Lebanese Left.⁸¹

Kissinger, however, did not see the situation in Lebanon as justifying an Israeli intervention. At the beginning of October 1975, Kissinger warned Allon against an intervention in Lebanon, and assured the Israelis that he would seek to prevent Syria from entering into Lebanon as well. Allon, however, stressed to Kissinger that any military action by Syria would precipitate an Israeli response.⁸² Kissinger believed an Israeli intervention would add new tensions at a critical time during the Sinai II negotiations and draw Syria and Egypt further into the civil war, as well as into further into conflict with one another. Egyptian president Anwar Sadat had expressed his reservations to Washington about Syria's heightened role in Lebanon and his concerns about Syria's relations with the Palestinians.⁸³ According to Rifaat al-Asad, Egypt was itself seeking to have influence with the Palestinians and other Leftist groups in Lebanon.⁸⁴

During the autumn of 1975, Kissinger sought to constrain President Asad from entering militarily in Lebanon as well. Discussing Syria's role in Lebanon in a meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group on the 13th of October, Kissinger noted:

⁸⁰ Telegram. 1975, October 11. Kissinger to Malcolm Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel-SDT From SECSTATE-EXDIS, NSA PCF MESA; Minutes. 1975, October 10, 10:40–11:10 am. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. Ford Library, NSC Institutional Files, Box 25, Meeting Minutes, WSAG-Originals, October 1975.

⁸¹ Weinberger 1986, p. 281; Minutes. 1975, October 13, 10:40–11:14 am. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. Ford Library, NSC Institutional Files, Box 25, Meeting Minutes, WSAG-Originals, October 1975.

⁸² Weinberger 1986, p. 281; Telegram. 1975, October 11. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel-SDT From SECSTATE-EXDIS, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files Middle East and South Asia (hereafter NSA PCF MESA); Telegram. 1975, October 16. Toon to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 18, Israel—SDT To SECSTATE—EXDIS (4), National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files Middle East and South Asia; Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, October 16. Ford Library, Box 16, NSA Memcon, October 16, 1975, Ford, Kissinger; Telegram. 1975, October 24. Toon to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 19, Israel—SDT To SECSTATE—EXDIS, NSA PCF MESA.

⁸³ Kissinger, Henry A. *Years of Renewal*, reprint edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999B), pp. 1040–1043; Memorandum of Conversation. 1975, October 9. Ford Library, Box 15, NSA Memcon, 1973-1977, Oct 9, 1975, Ford, Kissinger; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 1040-1043.

⁸⁴ Interview with Rifaat al-Assad.

We can tell the Syrians that we are interested in the independence and security of Lebanon but not necessarily in any one specific arrangement. We're open-minded. What is their thinking? It is our judgment that if there is foreign military intervention, Israel may come in. If there is no foreign military intervention, we could probably prevent Israeli intervention.⁸⁵

Imagining the worst-case scenario if Syria intervened, Kissinger said:

If the Syrians go in, there would be a radical change in the balance, whatever reasons the Syrians give. The Israelis would go in, even if the Syrians say they are going in to help the Christians. It's not inconceivable that the Syrians would go in to come up with a moderate solution. Suppose they went in to achieve a 50-50 split? That's not impossible; it would be a basically moderate course. But the Israelis would go in no matter what the Syrians stated as their reasons.⁸⁶

Uninterested in becoming involved in Lebanon's internal affairs, Kissinger was not opposed to Syria's role in re-shaping the Lebanese political process through diplomatic mediation, and he even acknowledged that Syria could play a constructive role in Lebanon. In spite of that, he opposed military intervention by Damascus because, however acceptable Damascus' intentions were, Israel would perceive the intervention as shifting the balance of power in Lebanon in Syria's favour. Such action could provoke an Israeli intervention and draw the region into conflict.⁸⁷

In November 1975, at the request of Kissinger Ambassador Richard Murphy conveyed to President Asad the US's deep concerns about Syria entering Lebanon. Kissinger also tried to get a better understanding of Syria's mediatory intentions in Lebanon. From the outset, Kissinger was not opposed to a slight adjustment of the political balance in Lebanon, but shared Israel's views that a leading position for the Maronites was in America's interest. Asad, however, rebuffed Murphy's demands in November, and stated that "if Frangieh asked for them [Syrian forces], they would be at his disposal."⁸⁸

Despite Asad's rebuff of Murphy, until the spring of 1976 Asad largely avoided introducing Syrian forces into Lebanon, the exception being his deployment of Syrian-backed Palestinian forces in January. Murphy noted that Asad was not interested in becoming militarily involved in Lebanon, and his refusal to use regular forces reflected this as well as his reluctance to take any action that would provoke an Israeli intervention in Lebanon.

⁸⁵ Minutes. 1975, October 13, 10:40-11:14 am. Washington Special Actions Group Meeting. Ford Library, NSC Institutional Files, Box 25, Meeting Minutes, WSAG- Originals, October 1975.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Telegram. 1975, October 16. Murphy to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—State Department Telegrams (hereafter SDT) to SECSTATE—NODIS (7), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1975, November 2. Murphy to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (8), NSA PCF MESA.

According to Murphy, Asad's caution about introducing Syrian forces in Lebanon bolstered Kissinger's strategy of keeping Syria and Israel out of the country. Kissinger hoped that Lebanon's internal problems could be resolved through either the parties themselves or through Syria's political mediation.⁸⁹

Joumblatt's decision to threaten to use military force to remove President Frangieh on the 14th of March 1976 threatened to derail Kissinger's policy on non-interference in Lebanon's affairs by its neighbours. Murphy met with General Shihabi on the 14th, where the Syrian Army chief of staff warned that Syria might have to take military action in light of the failure to bring about a political solution in Lebanon in the wake of the failure of the Constitutional Document, the collapse of the army, and the impending plan by Joumblatt to remove Frangieh by force. He also warned Murphy about the consequences of the partition of the Lebanese state, and went as far as to back a public statement made by Khaddam in January in support of "annexing" Lebanon if the political system could no longer hold together. Shihabi suggested to Murphy that Syria send "a peacekeeping force" to Lebanon, if that would be amenable to Israel. Murphy replied that such an intervention would lead to an Israeli invasion and that the US deeply opposed such a move.⁹⁰

Concerned about Murphy's conversation with Shihabi, in a meeting with his staff on the 15th of March 1976 Kissinger asked Murphy to meet with Asad: "Ask him what he is up to and, if we agree with him, we will do our best to help him. But warn him what he does must be done without the use of Syrian regular forces. In that event, we will guarantee that the Israelis do not interfere." Equally, he warned against Israeli intervention, and instructed his staff to "[t]ell him [Rabin] that I have instructed you to say that, if Israeli military actions are taken as a result, it would raise the most serious problems with us . . . or words to that effect. We have to be informed in advance."⁹¹

In meetings with President Asad on the 15th and 18th of March, Murphy warned Asad against introducing regular ground forces in Syria. Asad rejected Murphy's warnings, insisting that Israel should not interfere in Lebanon's internal politics because the civil war in Lebanon was an Arab concern.⁹² Going against Kissinger's demands that Syria refrain from

⁸⁹ Interview with Richard Murphy.

⁹⁰ Telegram. 1976, March 14. Murphy to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (10), NSA PCF MESA.

⁹¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, March 15. National Archives, RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973–77, Box 16, Nodis Memcons, March 1976, Folder 2.

⁹² Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, March 24. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 347, Department of State Memorandum of Conversations, Internal, December 1975–March 1976; Telegram. 1976, March 16. Kissinger to Murphy. Ford Library, Box 31, Syria—

intervening, Asad went ahead with a limited military operation. However, cautious about provoking an Israeli intervention, Asad used Syrian-backed Palestinian forces and camouflaged Syrian regular army soldiers to send a message to Israel and the United States that his country was not going to introduce regular forces and provoke an Israeli intervention.⁹³

In the midst of the siege on the Presidential Palace, Khaddam met with Robert Pelletreau, the US chargé d'affaires in Damascus, on the 23rd of March and informed him of President Frangieh's request for Syrian military assistance. Khaddam inquired what the American response would be if a Syrian intervention did occur. Through Pelletreau, Kissinger informed Khaddam that the introduction of full-scale ground forces could trigger an Israeli push into southern Lebanon.⁹⁴ In the Washington Special Actions Group meeting on the 24th of March 1976, Kissinger stressed that “[g]iven the likely Egyptian reaction and the Israeli re-action, allowing the Syrians to go in would just be opening an impossible can of worms. If the Syrians go in, the Israelis would almost certainly go in themselves. They would probably tell us to buzz off — face us down”⁹⁵

Reflecting on Syria's intervention in support of President Frangieh, Kissinger saw this shift in Syria's attitude against the Lebanese Left as beneficial to American and Israeli interests. He told President Ford on the 24th of March 1976:

We have a really bizarre situation in Lebanon. Syria is supporting the conservatives and Christians against the PLO and the Communists. Egypt is supporting the leftists and the PLO against Syria. The Soviet Union should be supporting Syria, but it also supports the PLO. Israel is, of course, against the PLO. We cannot allow Israel to go into South Lebanon. If we don't restrain them, there will be a UN Security Council meeting where we will either have to condemn them or veto — and either one is bad.⁹⁶

For the United States, then, the situation in Lebanon confounded Kissinger's expectations about Syria's behaviour. The case of Lebanon illustrated how a state such as Syria can be willing to balance its identity with its interests, and even support the same group as its

SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 18. Murphy to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (11), NSA PCF MESA.

⁹³ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 7.

⁹⁴ Telegram. 1976, March 23. Pelletreau to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (11), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 23. Kissinger to Pelletreau. Ford Library, Box 31, Syria—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 24. Pelletreau to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (11), NSA PCF MESA.; Telegram. 1976, March 24. Kissinger to Pelletreau. Ford Library, Box 31, Syria—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA..

⁹⁵ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, March 24, 2:20 p.m. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 347, Department of State Memorandum of Conversations, Internal, December 1975–March 1976.

⁹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, March 24, 9:45-10:45 a.m. Ford Library, NSA Memcon, Box 18, March 24, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Rumsfeld, Scowcroft.

ideational enemy, in this case Israel, to achieve its strategic and ideational aims, even if that group posed a threat to the Palestinian Resistance. Strategically, Asad aligned with a group that had less in common with Syria's identity than the Lebanese Left in order to prevent the collapse of the Lebanese state, which could in turn threaten Syria's stability and also draw Israel into Lebanon. However, while Kissinger saw this shift as beneficial to American interests, he had concerns about how Israel would view Syria's intentions.⁹⁷

1.2.2. Red Lines and American Mediation: March–May 1976

Recognizing how the deteriorating situation in Lebanon could present more opportunities for Syria to potentially intervene militarily in Lebanon through either its Palestinian forces or its regular ground forces, Kissinger met with Israel's Ambassador Simcha Dinitz on the 23rd of March to discuss the Israeli mood about an escalating Syrian role in Lebanon. Out of concern for the Maronite community, Dinitz offered what amounted to a "red line" understanding on Lebanon, with three main conditions for an escalated Syrian role. First, Syria could not introduce more than a brigade of Syrian forces not publicly identified as Syrian regular ground forces, including the forces in Lebanon present at that time. Second, Syria was not allowed to deploy heavy weaponry or machinery into the conflict. Third, Syria could only advance ten kilometres beyond the Damascus–Beirut Line. If these conditions were violated, Israel would intervene in southern Lebanon to secure its border. Dinitz stressed to Kissinger that this informal agreement could not be construed as Israel tolerating a permanent role for Syria in Lebanon.⁹⁸ Richard Murphy recalls that he met with Asad after these lines were agreed, and detailed to the Syrian president the extent of military action in Lebanon that Israel would tolerate. Asad agreed to these conditions and said he would respect them.⁹⁹

On the 25th of March, Khaddam met with Pelletreau and informed him that Syria was considering a limited intervention with normal ground forces in Lebanon to contain the LNM. The intervention would centre on Beirut and would avoid southern Lebanon. To gain

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Telegram. 1976, March 16. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 25. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 26. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 28. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 27. Pelletreau to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (11), NSA PCF MESA. ; Telephone Conversation. 1976, March 27, 5:40 pm. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Kissinger and the Israeli Ambassador (Dinitz). Digital National Security Archive, The Kissinger Telephone Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977, George Washington University.

⁹⁹ Interview with Richard Murphy.

support for this action and to try to pressure Israel to avoid intervening, Asad reached out to France and Jordan, urging them to persuade the US to forestall Israel from intervening. Kissinger noted that Israel would only tolerate an intervention along the red lines it had outlined.¹⁰⁰

With the risks of Syria taking military action growing by the day, during a meeting at the State Department on the 27th of March 1976 Kissinger stressed, “[W]e cannot allow the Lebanese situation to go on teetering on the brink. We must take a more active role in this.”¹⁰¹ Expressing exasperation with Israel’s opposition to a Syrian intervention in Lebanon, Kissinger noted to Brent Scowcroft, the National Security Advisor, later in the day, “You know, this is just another example of how the Israelis have done themselves in.¹⁰² They didn’t want Lebanon to be part of the Syrian military system, so by stonewalling on this they will succeed in forcing the PLO to take over. And then they will still have Lebanon as part of the Syrian military system.”¹⁰³

Noting the potential domestic opposition to such an intervention, Kissinger stressed, “You know what will happen if the Syrians move in: The Congressional outburst, the calls for cutting off Syrian aid, the raging about the Soviets. This will certainly be seen as a Soviet-inspired maneuver to overcome the defenseless Lebanese people.” While Kissinger viewed Syria’s intervention as potentially beneficial in Lebanon and as a means to contain the PLO, he had reservations that in the long term it would increase Syrian hegemony over Lebanon and that Syria’s alliance with the Maronites would only be temporary. He considered Syria’s more natural allies to be the Lebanese Left and the Palestinians. Therefore, achieving a

¹⁰⁰Telegram. 1976, March 25. Pelletreau to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (11), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 27. Ford Library, Pelletreau to Kissinger. Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (11), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 25. Pickering to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 23, Jordan—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (23), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 28. Pickering to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 23, Jordan—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (24), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 28. Kissinger to Rush. Ford Library, Box 4, France—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (5)..

¹⁰¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, March 27, 5:45 p.m. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 347, Department of State Memorandum of Conversations, Internal, December 1975–March 1976.

¹⁰² On the 3rd of November 1975, Brent Scowcroft succeeded Henry Kissinger as National Security Advisor to the president, but Kissinger remained secretary of state until the end of Ford’s presidency and still retained his central position as the chief architect of President Ford’s foreign policy, according to Richard Herman (Interview with Richard Herman).

¹⁰³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, March 27, 6:50 p.m. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 347, Department of State Memorandum of Conversations, Internal, December 1975–March 1976.

political solution without a Syrian intervention could be beneficial for American interests in the long term.¹⁰⁴

Concerned about an impending Syrian intervention, Kissinger sought to build more support from the Israelis for a potential Syrian move if Khaddam's mediation failed. On the 27th of March, Kissinger stressed to Dinitz the potential consequences of the breakdown of the Lebanese state, and even, potentially, Syria. Dinitz rejoined that Syria's role in Lebanon would be counter-productive. In an effort to make the Israeli position more flexible, Ambassador Malcom Toon met with the Israeli leadership to see if they would be able to move beyond Dinitz's stipulations for Syria's role.¹⁰⁵ Toon received encouraging news from Tel Aviv. They repeated their concerns regarding what Syria would do with this position in Lebanon, but they did see a potentially useful role for Syria in mediating a political solution more forcefully. Toon had the impression that Israel would tolerate a larger Syrian presence in Lebanon, including allowing heavier weaponry if Israel received advance notice, if Syria stayed out of southern Lebanon, and if Damascus was committed to not occupy Lebanon permanently.¹⁰⁶

Hoping to avoid a Syrian military intervention, Secretary Kissinger decided to have the US enter the fray of Lebanon's domestic politics in a limited capacity. He sent Ambassador Dean Brown to meet with the different Lebanese political factions and see if they could come to an agreement on the political settlement at the beginning of April.¹⁰⁷ To prepare for Brown's mission in late March, the embassy in Lebanon had already begun to engage the groups in Lebanon to see what could be done to create conditions for a peace settlement.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Telephone Conversation. 1976 March 27, 7:02 pm. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Kissinger and the Israeli Ambassador (Dinitz). Digital National Security Archive, The Kissinger Telephone Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977, George Washington University.

; Telegram. 1976, March 31. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA.

¹⁰⁶ Telegram. 1976, March 31. Toon to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 19, Israel—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (12), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 3. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (7), NSA PCF MESA..

¹⁰⁷ Telegram. 1976, April 1. Kissinger to Brown. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (1), Box 25, NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 2. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (1), NSA PCF MESA; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, March 31. Ford Library, Box 18, NSA Memcon, March 31, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Rumsfeld, Scowcroft, Lynn (OMB).

¹⁰⁸ Telegram. 1976, March 29. Lambrakis To Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (4), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, March 30. Lambrakis To Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (4), NSA PCF MESA.

Ambassador Brown's mission in Lebanon showed no real signs of progress by the beginning of April, with the different Lebanese political factions unwilling to make peace.¹⁰⁹ Adding to this, on the 5th of April Syria began to expand its military presence in Lebanon. The Israeli leadership raised no great objections, seeing the Syrian action as acceptable along the lines they outlined to Kissinger and Toon.¹¹⁰ During the National Security Council meeting on the 7th of April, Kissinger still underscored the risk of Lebanon tearing apart the post-1973 peace talks if Syria and Israel entered into the civil war. Kissinger even raised questions over what the potential Soviet response would be if Lebanon's civil war became another Arab–Israeli war. He viewed Lebanon as a potential avenue for an increased Soviet role if the Soviets concluded that Israel was planning to intervene in Lebanon.¹¹¹

As a result, Kissinger sought to redouble Brown's diplomatic efforts to reach a political solution. Kissinger hoped that Brown could secure an Arab-monitored ceasefire, which could lead to Syrian forces playing a large role in this force. He believed this process could strengthen the moderate forces in Lebanon and isolate the radical forces, including Yasir Arafat's PLO. Kissinger hoped that a Syrian-dominated Palestinian Resistance in the short term would be more amenable to his wider peace initiatives.¹¹²

Ambassador Brown made some limited progress in moving the LNM, the Maronite Christians, and the Palestinians closer to a negotiated settlement. Brown played an influential role in securing President Frangieh's commitment to allowing early elections. However, it is likely that Frangieh made the decision more out of pressure from Damascus than Washington. Brown hoped it would be easier to re-establish order in Lebanon after the presidential elections the Lebanese Left demanded with, notably, a multi-confessional security force to take the place of the disintegrated army.¹¹³ However, as Jomblatt recalls in his memoir, he rejected these elections as rigged by Syria.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Telegram. 1976, April 2. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (1), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 2.

¹¹⁰ Telegram. 1976, April 5. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (5), NSA PCF MESA; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, April 7. Ford Library, Box 2, NSA Memcon, National Security Advisor National Security Council Meetings File.

¹¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, April 7. Ford Library, Box 2, NSA Memcon, National Security Advisor National Security Council Meetings File.

¹¹² Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, April 7. Ford Library, Box 2, NSA Memcon, National Security Advisor National Security Council Meetings File; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, April 13. Ford Library, Box 19, NSA Memcon, April 13, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft, Rumsfeld.

¹¹³ Telegram. 1976, April 5. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (5), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 7. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 14. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (7), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 12. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—

With this diplomatic effort failing and unwilling to expend any further diplomatic effort directly, Kissinger and Ford became more open to France's offer on the 10th of May to potentially intervene in Lebanon. However, the Israeli leadership rejected this offer on the 17th of May, believing that France could use its intervention as a pretext for a larger Syrian role in Lebanon. Kissinger noted to Ford on the 18th that Israel still had deep reservations about a full-scale Syrian intervention. He still believed that, while Israel showed some willingness to allow a Syrian presence in Lebanon, an intervention involving more than the forces already present in Lebanon could spark an Israeli intervention.¹¹⁵

1.2.3. A Green Light? Syria's Intervention and American and Israeli Acquiescence

Unable to contain the violence in Lebanon, between the 31st of May and the 5th of June 1976 6,000 Syrian regular ground forces and 250 Syrian tanks entered Lebanon, marking the beginning of Syria's full-scale intervention in the neighbouring country.¹¹⁶ Richard Murphy recalls that Asad did not ask the US for a green light to intervene and did not inform the US of his plans before the intervention on the 5th of June 1976. Murphy noted that Asad did not see the need to ask the US for a "green light" because, in his estimation, his initial intervention did not violate the "red lines" agreement.¹¹⁷

With news of the intervention, Kissinger stressed publicly that America did not support external intervention in Lebanon. In a conversation on the 11th of June, King Hussein of

SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (6), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 23. Waring to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 26, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (9), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 10. Murphy to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (12), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 13. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE – NODIS (7), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 21. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 26, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (8), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 22. Kissinger to Brown. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (2), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 30. Waring to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 26, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (9), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, May 4. Murphy to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (13), National NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, May 5. Brown to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 26, Lebanon—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (10), NSA PCF MESA.

¹¹⁴ Joumblatt 1982, pp. 80–81.

¹¹⁵ Telegram. 1976, April 13. Kissinger to Murphy. Ford Library, Box 31, Syria—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (7), Box 31, NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 22. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Lebanon—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (7), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, April 23. Toon to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 19, Israel—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (12), NSA PCF MESA; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, May 10. Ford Library, Box 19, NSA Memcon, May 10, 1976, Ford, Kissinger; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, May 18. Ford Library, Box 19, NSA Memcon, May 18, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Rumsfeld; Telephone Conversation. 1976, May 17, 2:40 pm. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Kissinger and the Israeli Ambassador (Dinitz). Digital National Security Archive, The Kissinger Telephone Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977, George Washington University.

¹¹⁶ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 9.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Richard Murphy.

Jordan noted that Asad was interested in receiving support from the United States to escalate Syria's military intervention. Kissinger responded that he would not reverse America's publicly stated position, but he would tolerate Syria's expanded role in Lebanon. Kissinger stressed that Syria should not go beyond the Beirut–Damascus line.¹¹⁸ This position was amenable to the Israeli leadership, who, by June 1976, had made public statements in support of Syria's efforts to achieve a settlement of the civil war in Lebanon.¹¹⁹

While the United States did condone the increased Syrian role in Lebanon, the Syrians' decision to launch a full-scale military intervention in the beginning of June came independent of American considerations. With the failure to broker a peace agreement between the different factions and the possible repercussions of an Israeli intervention in Lebanon if the Christians turned to Israel for more support, President Asad concluded that the only way to bring order and stability to the state was to increase Syria's role in Lebanon. Explaining the rationale for Syria's military intervention, Abdul Halim Khaddam noted, "Too much said about this . . . but the fact is simple, Lebanon is a sister country . . . in a very bad civil war which reflected badly on Syria as well. If the Christians were marginalized even more, they may have resorted to Israel." Khaddam also stressed that Syria was defending not only the unity of Lebanon, but also the security of Syria. He noted that Lebanon could not be partitioned, and that Syria could not allow division between the Christians and the Palestinians.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Newspaper Article. 1976, June 2. Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. Views Syria's Entry Into Lebanon as Helpful," *New York Times*, p. 1; Newspaper Article. 1976, June 6. "Kissinger Denies New U.S. Moves on the Mideast," *New York Times*, p. 20; Telecon. 1976, June 2, 1:25 pm. Kissinger, Atherton; memorandum of Conversation. 1976, June 2. Ford Library, Box 19, June 2, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Spanish King Juan Carlos, Foreign Minister Areilza ; Telegram. 1976, June 9. Kissinger to Eilts. Ford Library, Box 26, June 6–13, 1976—Latin America SECTO (2), National Security Adviser Trip Briefing Books And Cables For Henry Kissinger 1974–76; Telegram. 1976, June 9. Meloy to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 26, June 6–13, 1976—Latin America TOSEC (3), National Security Adviser Trip Briefing Books And Cables For Henry Kissinger 1974–76; Telegram. 1976, June 10. Robinson to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 26, June 6–13, 1976—Latin America SECTO(4), National Security Adviser Trip Briefing Books And Cables For Henry Kissinger 1974–76; Telegram. 1976, June 10. Kissinger to Murphy. Ford Library, Box 26, June 6–13, 1976—Latin America SECTO (2), National Security Adviser Trip Briefing Books And Cables For Henry Kissinger 1974–76; Telephone Conversation. 1976, June 2, 1:25 pm. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of State Kissinger and Alfred Atherton. Digital National Security Archive, The Kissinger Telephone Conversations: A Verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977, George Washington University; Telegram. 1976, June 11. Kissinger to Murphy. Ford Library, Box 26, June 6–13, 1976—Latin America SECTO (3), National Security Adviser Trip Briefing Books And Cables For Henry Kissinger 1974–76; Telegram. 1976, June 11. Kissinger to Robinson. Ford Library, Box 26, June 6–13, 1976—Latin America SECTO (3), National Security Adviser Trip Briefing Books And Cables For Henry Kissinger 1974–76.

¹¹⁹ Weinberger 1986, p. 282.

¹²⁰ Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

Richard Murphy notes that Asad repeatedly stressed to him that his military intervention in Lebanon was by invitation. In Asad's view, Frangieh's request for Syrian military assistance in March 1976 made Syria's intervention one by invitation, not one by pre-emption. Murphy noted: "Essentially, Suleiman Frangieh was a loyalist and had good relations [with Asad] . . . not all Maronites felt the way Frangieh did. He asked for help and they agreed." In Asad's view, he was invited into Lebanon at the request of the Lebanese president.¹²¹

Concurring with Khaddam's assessment of the Syrian intervention, Rifaat al-Asad explained that Syria's decision to intervene in Lebanon was based on the concern that if Syria did not act, the Christians would be defeated. He envisioned Syria's role in Lebanon as a limited one, and had preferred that UN intervene instead of Syria. Rifaat al-Asad stated that he was generally against a long-term intervention, but circumstances drew Syria in.¹²²

Both Khaddam and Asad repeatedly stressed that American concerns played little role in Hafiz al-Asad's calculations. They stressed that after Sinai II, relations between the two states were not very strong. Khaddam recalled that prior to the invasion, President Asad had the impression that the United States did not approve of Syria's presence in Lebanon. Rifaat al-Asad had also concluded that the United States was not supportive of a Syrian intervention in Lebanon.¹²³

Khaddam also emphasized that the Soviet Union was not consulted. Khaddam recalled how the Soviet premier, Alexei Kosygin, arrived in Damascus on the 1st of June 1976 to meet with Hafiz al-Asad, unaware of Syria's full-scale intervention. The Soviet premier was deeply surprised to find out that Asad had decided to intervene without notifying Moscow. That decision illustrates his willingness to act independently from the Soviet Union to pursue his country's interests.¹²⁴ Richard Murphy recalled a Soviet diplomat telling him when he was stationed in Damascus during this period: "It is true that Syria accepts everything from the Soviet Union except advice."¹²⁵

On balance, though, the American archival record details an extensive level of consultation between the United States and Syria before the introduction of these regular ground forces, which indicates that Hafiz al-Asad did weigh American and Israeli responses. Richard Murphy recalled that Asad was very cautious about Syria's role in Lebanon and consulted regularly with him. Even though he was sceptical of the US's role in the region and its

¹²¹ Interview with Richard Murphy.

¹²² Interview with Rifaat al-Asad.

¹²³ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad.

¹²⁴ Interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad.

¹²⁵ Interview with Richard Murphy.

relations with Israel, the Syrian president did not want any problems with the United States. Asad was concerned about triggering an Israeli intervention and relied on his relations with the US to measure the temperature of Israel. Murphy also noted the while the US did not encourage an intervention, it brokered a “red lines” agreement which gave Asad a sense of how far he could intervene in Lebanon in June 1976.¹²⁶ Subsequently, though, Asad did check with the United States whether he could escalate his intervention and Kissinger privately assured him that he could, as did Rabin in public statements.

In a meeting with senior American diplomats in Paris on the 22nd of June, Kissinger reflected on the events in Lebanon: “In any case, we lost control of events. Maybe we’re still in a not too bad strategic position. A big Syrian intervention in March would have brought in the Israelis. Israeli intervention would have soured our relations with all the Arabs.”¹²⁷ Despite the US’s failure to broker a political settlement, Kissinger acknowledged the importance of the “red lines” agreement in preventing an Israeli–Syrian confrontation in Lebanon. Explaining why Asad intervened, Kissinger concluded, “They went in because they couldn’t make their political settlement stick, and they were afraid the PLO would become out of control and become an instrument of Iraq and Libya.”¹²⁸

1.2.4. Resistance, Attrition, and a Settlement: June–October 1976

Syria’s military intervention in Lebanon represented a final option for the Syrian government to attempt to achieve a settlement of the political situation in Lebanon. In one of the most striking ruptures, Asad had personally appealed to Yasir Arafat to abstain from fighting in favour of the LNM, but Arafat chose instead to back Kamal Joumblatt and the LNM. This rupture presented a significant challenge for the Syrian state, because its identity was so interlinked with the Palestinians that the idea that President Asad could intervene against them created deep opposition in the Arab world. Egypt and Iraq in particular opposed Syria’s actions, arming and assisting Syria’s opponents.¹²⁹

In a speech on the 20th of July 1976, in response to the fierce criticism from the Arab world for his intervention in Lebanon, Asad sought to outline Syria’s positive role in the Lebanese state. Justifying his deepening role in his country’s neighbour, he emphasized the common identity of Syria and Lebanon, and thus the natural reasons why these two states are

¹²⁶ Interview with Richard Murphy.

¹²⁷ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, June 22, 5:00-7:35 pm. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, CL 347, Department of State Memorandum of Conversations, Internal, April–June, 1976.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Seale 1988, Ch. 17.

interlinked. Asad stressed, “We will not adopt any decisions without giving due consideration to our national and pan-Arab interests. . . . Syria is the land of the Palestinian struggle.”¹³⁰ Asad’s speech reflects the tension between identity and strategic interests in his foreign policy. Even though Asad himself viewed Syria’s role in Lebanon in terms of both ideational and strategic interests, the two were hard to balance at times. In this speech, Asad tried to defend his actions in both ideational and strategic terms. In terms of strategic interests, he sought to illustrate the threat the collapse of the Lebanese state would have on Syria’s position. In ideational terms, he highlighted the common identity of Syria and Lebanon. Even though he did acknowledge that he had to take action contradictory to his state’s ideational link with the Palestinians, he argued his actions were for the greater good of the Arab world. Asad also emphasized that despite these events, Syria still viewed itself as the champion of the Palestinians. This speech illustrates how even though Asad struggled to reconcile his state’s identity with its interests in his foreign policy at times, he clearly gave weight to both in his foreign policy decision-making.¹³¹

Between the 31st of May and the 5th of June 1976, Asad deployed his forces along three arteries: to secure the north all the way to Tripoli, to secure the central part of Lebanon, and to secure Sidon in the south. However, the Palestinians and the LNM proved more determined than Syria had first calculated. Syrian troops were halted at Sofar, on the way to Damascus. An additional 6,000 troops had entered the state by the 7th of June and were able to overcome some of the initial resistance and advance closer to Beirut. In their attempt to secure Sidon, they were halted on the outskirts of the city. These setbacks were further exacerbated both by defections from the Syrian-sponsored Palestinian units and by opposition from Syrian military personnel to attacking the Palestinians and the LNM.¹³²

In an effort to end the fighting, on the 9th of June Libya and Algeria arranged a ceasefire between Syria and the Palestinians and LNM. The Arab League agreed to create a pan-Arab peacekeeping force to replace the Syrian military, with the hope this would calm tensions. The new pan-Arab force was a predominantly Syrian force, with smaller representation from other Arab states. This diplomacy also produced an agreement that Syria would withdraw its armed forces from its positions in Lebanon and the Palestinians and the LNM would do the

¹³⁰ Speech. 1976, July 20. Given by Hafiz al-Asad.

¹³¹ Speech. 1976, July 20. Given by Hafiz al-Asad; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam; Abraham 1996, Ch. 4.

¹³² Weinberger 1986, Ch. 8; Abraham 1996, Ch. 4; Dawisha 1980, pp. 97–135; El Khazen 2000, pp. 345–349.

same, but Syria chose to remain in its positions on Mount Lebanon and near Sidon, even after the Palestinians complied.¹³³

From the 9th of June through the 27th of September 1976, Syria reversed its initial losses through a more fine-tuned military strategy. After initially underestimating the ability of the Palestinians and the LNM to resist Syrian incursions, Syria concentrated on strangling the LNM and the PLO's communication and re-supply lines, both on land and at sea. They increased their naval blockade of the coast. They also used their forces in the Beqaa Valley to cut off the communication lines between the northern and southern parts of the country. By cutting off supplies and communications, the Syrian army consolidated their control over the hills near Farayya, in the northern Kusrawan region of Lebanon. They also advanced their positions in Mount Lebanon and in the area around Sidon. They shelled Tripoli, in the north of the country. These advances were assisted by an aggressive posture from the Maronite Christians, who also further consolidated their positions within the state. Strategically, the Maronite Christian militias sought to control the refugee camps of Jisr al-Basha and Tall al-Za'tar, which blocked access to the Maronite Christian strongholds in the north and east of Lebanon. On the 22nd of June 1976, they initiated a substantial military campaign targeting West Beirut and the refugee camps in East Beirut. These dual campaigns put the LNM and the Palestinians on the defensive.¹³⁴

Facing increased pressure, on the 11th of July Yasir Arafat called on the Arab League to bring an end to the fighting. Syria did agree to partially withdraw from Sidon on the 12th of July. However, on the 20th it launched a sweeping military offensive against the Lebanese Left's strongholds in the mountain range to the east of Beirut. On the 22nd, the PLO called for a ceasefire agreement with Syria; an agreement was reached on the 29th of July. This agreement did not sit well with either the LNM or more radical elements of the Palestinian resistance. The Maronite Christians, who felt threatened by this ceasefire, continued their siege of the Palestinian refugee camp of Tall al-Za'tar. They also attacked al-Nab'a, a slum predominantly inhabited by Shi'a Muslims. On the 12th of August, the Maronite Christians captured Tall al-Za'tar. These actions tore apart the Syrian-Palestinian ceasefire.¹³⁵

In August, the fighting expanded to Mount Lebanon and to the areas still under the control of the LNM. By the 16th, Syria had captured al-Hammana, disrupting the LNM's communication lines with their stronghold in the Shuf area to the south. Maronite Christian forces targeted the LNM's position on Mount Lebanon in the Dhur Shuwayr area. These

¹³³ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 8.

¹³⁴ Avi-Ran 1991, pp. 17–49; Weiberger 1986, Ch. 8; El Khazen 2000, pp. 345–349.

¹³⁵ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 8; El Khazen 2000, pp. 345–349; Abraham 1996, Ch. 5.

gains by the Syrian military and the Maronite Christians put Syria in a stronger position to negotiate with the PLO. A further ceasefire was attempted in the beginning of September, but Syria refused to accede to the PLO's demands. Syria's military actions, in addition to shoring up their position in Lebanon, allowed the presidency to transition from Frangieh to Sarkis on the 23rd of September. On Sarkis' inauguration, he further legitimized Syria's role in Lebanon by declaring that Lebanon had asked for Syrian intervention. He made few concessions to the Palestinians beyond recognizing their place in his country, but said that they had to adhere to the 1969 Cairo Agreement. Arafat declared a ceasefire to allow the inauguration to occur. In a rejection of Arafat's ceasefire, a Palestinian militant group attacked the Semiramis Hotel in Damascus on the 26th of September. Asad blamed Arafat for the attack.¹³⁶

On the 15th of August, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait called for an Arab League meeting to be held in mid-October. Libya proposed that an Arab League peacekeeping force replace Syrian forces. Reacting to this news, Syria sought to further consolidate its control over Lebanon so that it could dictate the settlement. In the final military phase of Syria's offensive, which began on the 28th of September and ended on the 17th of October, building on its successes from the previous month, Syria sought to completely defeat the LNM and the Palestinians so that they would submit to Syrian rule. The Christians also warned that if the Syrians did not continue to back them, they would seek Israeli assistance. After failing to capture Dhur Shuwayr in August, the Syrian 3rd Armoured Division and Christian militias captured this strategic holdout of the Lebanese Left on Mount Lebanon along the Damascus–Beirut highway. From the 12th to the 16th of October, Syrian forces advanced towards Beirut and Sidon. Rejecting further opportunities for a negotiated settlement with the PLO, Syria tried to seize control of Alay, the headquarters of the LNM and the Palestinian Resistance.¹³⁷

Syria's final offensive was halted by Arab League diplomacy. Exerting its weight, Saudi Arabia convinced Asad to attend the conference, and a settlement of the civil war was arranged on the 25th and 26th of October. Syria, the Palestinians, and the Lebanese factions agreed to ceasefire on the 16th of November, which took full effect across Lebanon by the 21st. The Palestinians, as well as all the Lebanese confessional militias, agreed to return to the positions they had held before the war. The factions also agreed in theory to return their heavy armaments. The parties approved the expansion of the Arab Defence Force to 30,000,

¹³⁶ Avi-Ran 1991, pp. 17–49; Weiberger 1986, Ch. 8; El Khazen 2000, pp. 345–349; Abraham 1996, Ch. 4–6.

¹³⁷ Weinberger 1986, Ch. 8; Abraham 1996, Ch. 6; El Khazen 2000, pp. 352–355; Sunayama, Sonoko. *Syria and Saudi Arabia: Collaboration and Conflicts in the Oil Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), Ch. 2.

and allowed the Lebanese president to determine how large the Syrian presence in this force should be. Sarkis, a close ally of Damascus, allowed Syria to dominate the force. The Arab League also awarded \$90 million for the force's expenses, which ended up going to Damascus. The Palestinian Resistance pledged to respect the Cairo Agreement, and their compliance was monitored by the ADF. While expanding Syria's control in Lebanon, the agreement partially satisfied the Palestinians because it lifted many of the restrictions placed on them by the Cairo Agreement of 1969.¹³⁸

1.2.5. The US acquiesces to Syria's role in Lebanon

By July 1976, Kissinger believed that Syria's intervention was having a positive impact on securing the stability of Lebanon. Crucially, he saw it as an opportunity to further isolate the PLO and disrupt the LNM, whom he saw as "radicals." In Kissinger's estimation, Syria's intervention against these two groups secured the status quo in Lebanon, which the United States had accepted since 1958. Kissinger particularly appreciated that Israel chose to accommodate Syria's intervention.¹³⁹

On the 17th of July 1976, King Hussein of Jordan informed Kissinger that Asad had been given an ultimatum from the Russians. Moscow was demanding that Syria cease its intervention against the PLO and come to an agreement with the Palestinian group; it threatened to cut off all economic and military aid if they did not. On the 19th of July, Kissinger expressed to Ford his unease that these Soviet warnings might escalate superpower tensions in the region. Kissinger noted, "[W]e must keep the Syrians there and we may have to play tough." The Soviet Union, however, did not go through with its threats.¹⁴⁰ Yevgeny Primakov acknowledges in his memoirs that Syria and the Soviet Union came to see that they had common interests in stabilizing Lebanon. This episode of Soviet–Syrian relations further underscores how Syria, acting independently from the Soviet Union,

¹³⁸ Avi-Ran 1991, pp. 17-49; Weiberger 1986, Ch. 8; Abraham 1996, Ch. 6; El Khazen 2000, pp. 352–355; Sunayama 2007, ch. 2; Interview with Richard Murphy.

¹³⁹ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, June 18. Ford Library, Box 19, NSA Memcon, June 18, 1976, Cabinet Meeting; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, July 31. Ford Library, Box 20, July 31, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Ambassador Richard Murphy (Syria); Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, July 2. Ford Library, Box 20, NSA Memcon, July 2, 1976, Ford, Kissinger; Telegram. 1976, July 11. Murphy to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 32, Syria—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (14), NSA PCF MESA; Telegram. 1976, July 1. Kissinger to Seeyle. Ford Library, Box 25, Lebanon—State Department Telegrams From SECSTATE—NODIS (3), NSA PCF MESA; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, July 2. Ford Library, Box 20, NSA Memcon, July 2, 1976, Ford, Kissinger; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, July 16. Ford Library, Box 20, NSA Memcon, July 16, 1976, Ford, Kissinger.

¹⁴⁰ Telegram. 1976, July 17. Pickering to Kissinger. Ford Library, Box 27, Jordan—SDT To SECSTATE—NODIS (27), NSA PCF MESA; Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, July 19. Ford Library, Box 20, NSA Memcon, July 19, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft.

pursued its policies in spite of Soviet opposition. In a reversal of what one would traditionally expect in great power–small state relations, the Soviet Union acquiesced to Syria’s position. This episode shows how great powers can be constrained from acting by small powers.¹⁴¹

Kissinger considered Syria’s intervention in Lebanon “another great success.” On the 4th of November, he noted to Ford, “The PLO is going with their camps being put in place.” Kissinger was confident of Syrian over-lordship and that Syria would, as Asad had agreed, respect Israel’s concerns, noting to Ford on the 31st of July that “Asad has proven he is a careful, thoughtful man. If we can’t settle with him, I don’t know who we can.”¹⁴² Kissinger hoped that their relations, strengthened through Lebanon, would help facilitate a second round of talks between Syria and Israel after the 1977 elections.¹⁴³ But however confident Kissinger sounded in this exchange about future prospects for their relations, it is unlikely that he was being completely honest in this statement: the 1975 Sinai II agreement had effectively precluded Ford and Kissinger from pursuing a second disengagement agreement on the Golan.¹⁴⁴

As the archival documents show, Kissinger never considered Lebanon a priority in American foreign policy. In contrast to those who have argued that the US tried to trigger Syrian intervention in Lebanon to expand the US’s influence in the state, Kissinger considered Lebanon a headache that could destabilize his wider Middle East policy. His main concern was to prevent the crisis in Lebanon from destabilizing his negotiations with Israel and Egypt. He also sought to prevent the civil war from enveloping the region and potentially drawing in the Soviet Union. Kissinger thus initially pursued a policy of preventing intervention by Syria or Israel, which could have derailed his Middle East policy, but he was not opposed to Syria brokering a political settlement to the civil war. He had no interest in the US playing such a role.

By discouraging an Israeli intervention in Lebanon and accepting Syria’s mediatory role, Kissinger allowed Syria to frame the terms of the negotiations with Lebanon’s political parties. Only very reluctantly, when Syria was planning to intervene in Lebanon in March 1976, did Kissinger agree to send Ambassador Brown to negotiate with Lebanon’s political

¹⁴¹ Primakov, Yevgeny. *Russia and the Arabs* (New York: Basic Books 2009), Ch. 12; Interview with Rifaat al-Assad.

¹⁴² Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, July 26. Ford Library, Box 20, July 26, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft.

¹⁴³ Memorandum of Conversation. 1976, November 4. Ford Library, Box 21, November 4, 1976, Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft; Telegram. 1976, November 6. Kissinger to Toon. Ford Library, Box 17, Israel—SDT From SECSTATE—NODIS (8), NSA PCF MESA..

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter 5.

factions. By that time, however, Kissinger had concluded as well that it would be very difficult for the United States to prevent a Syrian intervention in Lebanon. To prevent a potential conflict between Syria and Israel, Kissinger brokered a “red lines” agreement to give space for a Syrian intervention if it chose to act. While Kissinger did not give a “green light” for Syria’s military intervention in June 1976 and actively discouraged it publicly, his “red lines” agreement and subsequent negotiations with Tel Aviv prevented Israel from intervening in response to Syria’s actions in Lebanon. Kissinger came to accept Syria’s role in Lebanon both politically and militarily, because it aligned with American interests and because Israel acquiesced. Reflecting on why the US accepted Syria’s intervention, Richard Murphy noted, “The sense was more that the Lebanese system was not able to maintain itself, maintain any stability in the country. . . . I think there was growing despair about Lebanon’s capacity to take care of itself. This went on through the 1980s.”¹⁴⁵ In Kissinger’s estimation, Syria’s intervention, to which the US merely acquiesced, prevented an even more violent conflict in Lebanon.¹⁴⁶

1.2.6. The Storms on the Horizon

Even though Syria had succeeded in defeating the LNM and the Palestinians and becoming the political and military steward of Lebanon by October 1976, by 1978 it was struggling to keep Lebanon stable. Increasing differences between the different groups could not be contained purely by Syrian military oversight. With the Maronite Christian community’s turn towards Israel in 1978 and their growing differences with Damascus, Asad switched his support to the Lebanese Left and the Palestinians. Syria’s intervention failed to achieve Asad’s initial objective of refashioning the Lebanese political system around a stable national identity. Lacking that, Lebanon continued to be vulnerable to outside interference and domestic infighting. Khaddam noted how Syria had to apply pressure constantly so that no group was stronger than any of the others, to keep any one group from destabilizing the confessional system. In Asad’s estimation, a Maronite-dominated state or a Leftist or Palestinian state carried equally unpleasant risks. The only way to prevent this was to ensure these groups were balanced through a confessional system.

While this security cooperation achieved both states’ short-term interests, neither state’s long-term interests were secured. By 1978 Syria was facing its own Vietnam, with no

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Richard Murphy.

¹⁴⁶ Kissinger 1999, Ch. 33.

options to ensure its own security without a continued role in Lebanon.¹⁴⁷ Richard Murphy asked, “Did [Asad] foresee that [his intervention in] Lebanon [would] turn into an occupation that bled the Syrian army white in terms of corruption?” He concluded that Asad never had any such intention for his military to remain permanently stuck in the milieu of Lebanon’s confessional politics which not only drained the Syrian government financially but also, encouraged corruption amongst his army officers.¹⁴⁸ The United States was forced to confront a destabilized Lebanese state again in 1978 with the breakdown of the November agreement, and had to go as far as to intervene in Lebanon in 1982 in an attempt to bring a resolution to the civil war which involved both Syrian and Israeli troops by 1982.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Cobban 1985, Ch. 7; Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Richard Murphy.

¹⁴⁹ Cobban 1985, Ch. 8; Shlaim, Ch. 10.

CONCLUSION

UNEXPECTED COOPERATION: US AND SYRIA

With the inauguration of President Jimmy Carter in January 1977, Henry Kissinger's long tenure as America's predominant foreign policy voice came to an end. President Gerald Ford had managed in a few short years to move the United States beyond Watergate and the turbulent resignation of Richard Nixon, the first American president in history to resign. Unlike Nixon, who saw his legacy in terms of foreign policy, Ford was largely a domestic policy president who maintained the same foreign policy agenda as his predecessor with the added pressure of Congressional scrutiny, but achieved a number of important closures of unresolved challenges in America's foreign relations. By 1975, Ford and Kissinger had secured a second disengagement agreement on the Sinai and had overseen the American withdrawal from South Vietnam. Successfully prying Egypt out the Soviet's orbit, Ford left office with the Soviet Union influence in the Middle East diminished. Asad's pragmatism, as evidenced by his negotiations with the United States, illustrated as well to Moscow how even in the case of Syria, the Soviet Union couldn't count on Syria as a consistent regional ally. The strengthened and deepening relationship with Egypt brought to an end nearly two decades of strained relations with one the region's most important actors.

Ford's presidency and Kissinger's tenure as secretary of state ended with unfinished diplomatic challenges in the Middle East in other respects. With Ford's signing of Sinai II, he effectively gave Israel assurances that even if he pursued a diplomatic initiative with Syria after the 1977 elections, he lost, the US would have only been able to achieve a further limited engagement on the Golan. Ford and Kissinger succeeded in removing Egypt from conflict with Israel and as a result, ensured that Israel's neighbours could never launch again a multi-front war against the state. Asad was in no position to launch an attack against Israel on his own. Ford and Kissinger left office however without a wider peace settlement negotiated.

By prioritizing the Egyptian track above the Syrian track, to the point that by 1975, the Syrian track was kept on-going to ensure the success of the Egyptian track, Ford and Kissinger had come to the conclusion that a wider peace settlement between Israel and her neighbours was unattainable at that point and that US interests in the region were largely secured without a wider settlement. As much as Ford and Kissinger sought to keep Syria

engaged and recognized the value of improved relations with Damascus, they recognized that the US was in no position at that point to deliver a Golan II agreement without potentially disrupting the Sinai II agreement, which they placed a higher priority on, and also recognized that the US wasn't in an advantageous position to move Israel to make further concessions on the Golan. With an upcoming presidential election and limited political capital, Ford domestically couldn't sustain a diplomatic initiative beyond achieving an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. Ford and Kissinger left office with Lebanon under the over-lordship of Damascus, but without any resolution of the Lebanese confessional differences. Fighting would break out in Lebanon again by 1978.

Hafiz al-Asad, disappointed by the failure of the Israeli disengagement agreements, had begun to turn away from the American peace process by 1977. He notably did not respond to Kissinger's overtures for a potential new peace initiative after the presidential elections. The Syrian president concluded that Kissinger's word couldn't be trusted, and that he was sold a peace process the US would not deliver on. He then sought new regional alignments to bolster his isolated position, with Egypt's withdrawal from belligerency with Israel. In disillusionment, Asad began to look for new avenues to confront the threat of Israel after his genuine peace overtures bore no fruit.¹

Entering Lebanon militarily in 1976, by the autumn of that year Hafiz al-Asad had achieved his immediate goals of preventing an Israeli intervention and preserving the fragile confessional balance of power, which tilted in favour of Syria's interests. He succeeded as well in gaining US support for this intervention and Israel's tacit approval. However, Asad's stabilization of the state began to unravel in 1978 with new communal violence erupting.²

With the peace process turning against Syria by 1977 and Lebanon's fragile peace briefly holding, this period of relations with the United States produced some substantive benefits to its regional position but left Syria isolated to a larger degree in the region than it had been before the October War. Hafiz al-Asad's security cooperation with the United States was, on balance, then a mixed blessing.

Asad was willing to break from past periods of his country's history and genuinely engage the United States on finding a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. With these steps, Asad turned his country away from its radical, rejectionist foreign policy. However, the United

¹ Hinesbusch, Raymond A. "The Foreign Policy of Syria." In Raymond Hinesbusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

² Interview with Abdul Halim Khaddam.

States didn't deliver on the Golan Heights, and Asad entered 1977 with no clear path to ending Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights.

By removing Egypt from conflict with Israel, Ford and Kissinger left office with a more durable security architecture than the one constructed after the 1967 war, but still a missing peace between Israel and its neighbours. Their Lebanon policy had also crumbled by 1978, leading to over a decade of war in Lebanon, notably involving an American intervention in Beirut in 1982.³ While the events in Lebanon were largely beyond the United States' control, Kissinger and Ford, who sought to avoid a substantial US role in Lebanon, by the summer of 1976, became too reliant on Syria to resolve Lebanon's confessional differences.

However, despite the mixed results that came from this period of US-Syrian relations, it's important to note that this period of relations represented an unexpected, arguably, serendipitous, turn in these two states' relations away from past relations. Nixon's willingness to risk engaging states that previous US Presidents sought to avoid engaging and Asad's own pragmatism, unlike his predecessors, was coincidental timing and circumstances that allowed these two states that had previously viewed one another as irreconcilable enemies to create a diplomatic channel that succeeded in achieving a partial disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel on the Golan in 1974 and also, a level of cooperation on Lebanon. Even with the inability to reach a second disengagement agreement on the Golan and Asad's growing disillusion with the US, this diplomatic channel remained open with a US Ambassador in Damascus and a Syrian Ambassador in Washington when Ford and Kissinger left office in 1977.

Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

For both the United States, a great power, and Syria, a small state, the period from 1973 to 1977 represented an important rupture from their past relations. As this study showed, the peace talks after the October War of 1973 marked a shift in both states' policies, from rejectionist irredentism in the case of Syria and containment in the case of the United States, to cautious engagement by both states. Prior to this period, both states viewed one another largely in terms of their ideational orientation. Syria viewed the United States as a pro-Israeli force in the region. The United States viewed Syria as a leftist, Soviet satellite that exhibited radicalism, belligerence, and irredentism. In the wake of the October War of 1973, both states began to reconsider their conceptions of one another. To better understand this

³ Shlaim, Ch. 10.

shift in their relations, this study examined the question: *What accounts for the security cooperation between Syria and the United States between 1973 and 1977?*

Four observations were made about this period of their relations:

First, as results of changes in both states' leaderships, realpolitik, alongside identity and ideational considerations, became more pronounced in both states' conceptions of their security environment in the Middle East and their relations with one another.

Breaking with the literatures' traditional interpretations of the International Relations of the Middle East, this study illustrated that, in the case of Syria, the consolidation of the state during this period allowed Hafiz al-Asad to balance both identity and interests in his conception of Syria's foreign policy unlike his predecessor, Saleh Jadid who couldn't maintain that balance. While Syria's foreign policies embraced realpolitik more saliently than in prior periods, Hafiz al-Asad never divorced his state's foreign policy from its complex identity.

For Asad, identity and interests played an equally important role in how Syria perceived its main foreign policy challenges during this period. In the case of his state's conflict with Israel, he viewed Israel in largely ideational terms as a Zionist, colonial state that stole Syrian lands and disenfranchised the Palestinian community. Despite this ideational enmity, Asad chose to engage Israel after the October War of 1973 to achieve his immediate goal: the return of the Golan Heights. The president recognized that due to Israel's military strength, he could not pursue his goals purely through force. In a break with Syria's past foreign policy, Asad signed a disengagement agreement with Israel on the Golan Heights in 1974 even though it only meant a return of a small percentage of the land (only 20 miles from Damascus). As Asad's closest advisors noted, the president was prepared to sign a larger, permanent ceasefire with Israel if he had received the entire Golan Heights back. However, Asad was not prepared to sign a peace treaty until Israel recognized the rights of the Palestinians. He was willing, then, to balance identity and interests to achieve his goals in the region.

In the case of Lebanon, Asad always viewed the state as interlinked with Syria, but not as a state that territorially needed to be under the control or administration of Syria. With the failure of the negotiations between the different confessional groups to reach a settlement by 1976, the Syrian president, based on his strategic calculations, intervened in Lebanon to support the Maronite Christian community to prevent an Israeli intervention in Lebanon. This Syrian intervention led to criticism in both the Arab world and in Syria over his

decision to intervene against the Palestinians, but Asad ignored this criticism. By going against his state's own identity, Asad showed that he was willing to bear such costs to pursue his state's strategic interests if they were threatened.

Equally, the United States was shaped by both its identity and interests during this period. In the wake of Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger introduced a new strategic conception to American foreign policy that sought to better balance America's identity with its interests. Kissinger concluded that the US should not base its alliances with states purely on their ideational affinity, as past presidents had a tendency to do: in his view, if a state shared common interests with the United States, Washington should work with that state to achieve American interests regardless of the state's identity. Kissinger and Nixon were willing, then, to break from their past relations with Syria after the October War of 1973 to engage a state Nixon once considered a radical Soviet satellite.

Through engaging Asad for the first time, Nixon and Kissinger reached an important disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel by succeeding in returning a small fraction of the land on the Golan Heights. This small step helped them move forward their negotiations with Egypt; furthermore, it contributed to the new security architecture they sought to build in the region to prevent another Arab–Israeli war. However, prioritizing a second disengagement between Israel and Egypt, Ford and Kissinger didn't genuinely seek a second disengagement on the Golan Heights. .

While Kissinger initially opposed a Syrian intervention in Lebanon, the positive gestures Syria was seeking to stabilize the state and prevent the it becoming dominated by the Palestine Liberation Organization lessened Washington's concerns about Syria's potential role in Lebanon. By securing an informal agreement between Damascus and Tel Aviv on the "red lines" of Syria's intervention in Lebanon, Kissinger and Ford became a *fait accompli* to Syria's intervention and privately—and, later, publicly—backed Syria's alliance with the Maronite Christian community.

Despite Kissinger's image as the consummate realist, America's identity played a significant factor in his negotiations with Syria. The substantial domestic support Israel had in the United States was a critical factor in constraining and foiling Kissinger's attempts to reach a second disengagement agreement between Syria and Israel. While Nixon was willing to expend political capital to confront Israel's domestic support in the United States, in the wake of Watergate, Ford and Kissinger, in a weaker domestic political position, chose to prioritize the Egypt track over the Syria track. Ford and Kissinger were concerned that if

they added too much pressure on Israel that it would endanger President Ford's re-election prospects.

To convince Israel to sign the Sinai II agreement in 1975, Ford, in a letter of understanding to Israel's leadership, gave Israel assurances that aid and political support would not be contingent on their commitments to the peace process. By doing so, the US lost its ability leverage aid against Israel in future negotiations with Syria. Election politics further enhanced Israel's position. Seeking re-election in 1976, Ford feared that Israel's domestic support base in the US could undermine his election prospects if he pressed too hard on Israel to make peace. Both Ford and Kissinger complained privately of how they were often forced to support Israel at the expense of America's interests in the Middle East, but Ford chose not to expend his limited political capital at home to change this relationship. As a result, by 1976, Ford and Kissinger succeeded in securing a disengagement agreement on the Sinai, but could not deliver a further disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights.

Second, while the Cold War was the predominant context for the US's interactions with Syria at the start of the 1970s, interactions between the US and Syria were also shaped by local conditions that emerged after the October War of 1973.

When Nixon and Kissinger entered office in 1969, the new president and his national security advisor concluded that the United States was in a weaker position internationally than at any previous time since the beginning of the Cold War. With the burden of Vietnam weighing on America's position globally, Nixon and Kissinger looked to regional allies in the Third World to more effectively contain and manage local crises. One such crisis was Black September of 1970 in Jordan. Nixon and Kissinger considered this crisis an attempt by the Soviet Union to expand its influence in the Middle East by using their satellite state, Syria, and their sponsored group, the PLO, as chess pieces in their regional ambitions. Nixon and Kissinger looked to Israel, an important regional ally, for support. Israel's willingness to come to the aid of the Hashemite monarch in exchange for significant US aid underscored to Washington the value of Israel as an ally against the Soviet Union in the Middle East, albeit a costly one politically and financially. The US avoided a situation where Nixon and Kissinger would have to employ ground forces to stabilize the situation as well.

The Arab–Israeli peace negotiations from 1969 to 1973 were viewed largely in this Cold War context. While Nixon supported efforts to reach a settlement between Israel and its neighbours, Kissinger's primary concern was ensuring Israel's security in any potential resolution of these states' territorial differences. Alongside the domestic considerations

discussed above, Nixon and Kissinger viewed Israel as an important ally against Soviet ambitions in the Middle East. Israel's conflict with its neighbours represented tangentially a Cold War conflict, because Israel's regional opponents were the Soviets' main satellite states in the region. Israeli military gains against Egypt and Syria after 1967, while not sustainable, limited the Soviets' influence and weakened their position in the region. Kissinger was against a peace process that could empower the Soviet Union at the expense of America's allies and its position in the region. If there was to be peace, Kissinger believed it had to be on America's terms and acceptable to Israel.

The October War of 1973 represented a critical breaking point in the Middle East's relations with the Cold War. While neither the United States nor the Soviet Union wanted another war between Israel and its neighbours in 1973, suspicions abounded that they both had a hand in starting it. These tensions would become salient as the war progressed. At the height of the war, the United States moved to re-supply Israel in response to its initial losses in the Egyptian and Syrian attacks. This additional aid led to the Soviet Union threatening to intervene on Egypt and Syria's behalf, resulting in the highest state of nuclear alert since the Cuban Missile Crisis. These tensions were gradually lessened by Kissinger's negotiations on a ceasefire, but they underscored how regional events in the Middle East could develop into wider Cold War confrontations, which neither side wanted.

With the end of the 1973 war, Nixon and Kissinger concluded that a US-led peace process between Israel and its neighbours was needed to both bring stability to the region and to exclude the Soviet Union from gaining influence in the region as a result of this post-war negotiating process. Kissinger invested substantial diplomatic resources and time to engineer a process that kept the Soviet Union out of the process. His step-by-step diplomacy allowed the United States to control the tempo and pace of these negotiations, and prevented a situation where the Soviet Union, supporting Israel's neighbours, could negotiate from one united front at the expense of Israel and the United States. In addition, both Nixon and Kissinger were concerned that a failure to achieve a single disengagement agreement with one of Israel's neighbours could lead to another war in the region.

The 1973 war also produced local conditions that shaped the US's strategic calculations towards the region. The 1973 OPEC embargo against the United States, a response to Washington's decision to re-supply Israel during the war, hit the American economy and the daily life of American citizens, adding significant pressure on the United States to reach an agreement. Kissinger hoped that removing a state like Egypt from the Arab-Israeli conflict would split the Arab world in the future and prevent OPEC from agreeing on a future oil

embargo. Further, as the peace process began to take a life of its own, Nixon and Kissinger were drawn into the local politics of the region.

Syria in particular confounded their expectations; the state they once considered a Soviet satellite was a much more dynamic actor than they had expected. In a telling exchange where Asad and Kissinger discussed Black September of 1970, Kissinger noted how he considered Syria as acting in lockstep with Moscow. Asad rebuffed this conclusion, and noted how Damascus had specific regional aims. Kissinger acknowledged how Washington had misread Syria's actions. In the US negotiations with Asad, Kissinger came to see Syria as a state that broke his traditional assumptions of the Cold War in the Third World. Damascus, notably, was willing to engage both super powers to advance their respective interests in the Middle East.

Thus Kissinger engaged the Middle East by 1974 in a context larger than purely Washington's contest with the Soviet Union. His engagement in Lebanon reflected this as well. With the breakdown of the Lebanese state by 1975, Kissinger was drawn into its domestic problems out of fear that such a conflict could draw Israel into war with its neighbours at the expense of the peace process, and could develop into a wider regional conflict which could draw in the Soviet Union. Kissinger did not view Lebanon's civil war as machinations by the Soviet Union, but as a conflict driven largely by local dynamics.

The conflict also confounded Washington's traditional assumptions about the Middle East and the Cold War. Syria, a significant recipient of Soviet aid, intervened in Lebanon against the PLO, an important concern to the Soviets, on behalf of the Maronite Christian community, which traditionally affiliated itself with Israel. The US, unlike in the case of Jordan's Black September, did not oppose Syria's intervention in Lebanon to try to stabilize the Lebanese state. Despite initial Soviet objections, Moscow eventually conceded to Syria's actions in Lebanon in 1977 as well.

For Hafiz al-Asad, the Cold War was an opportunity to try to maximize his regional position in contestation with Israel. As the first state in the Arab world to have a communist deputy in its parliament, since the mid-1950s Syria had had an important relationship with the Soviet Union, resulting in Soviet investment within the country and financial and military assistance from Moscow. A generation of Syrian military officers also received training in Moscow, including Hafiz al-Asad and his brother, Rifaat al-Asad. Syria, however, was not the ideal Soviet satellite. While Ba'thist ideology embraced socialism, communism was

viewed as a threat to the Ba'th Party and widely suppressed. Under Hafiz al-Asad, the Ba'th party's socialist ideology became subordinated to Asad's domestic and foreign policy goals.

Hafiz al-Asad also showed no deep loyalty to the Soviet Union. Even though he considered Moscow more pivotal than Washington when it came to his state's military and financial position, Asad equally was willing to engage Washington if such engagement could secure him the return of the Golan Heights. For Moscow, then, Asad was an ally they could never fully count on. Russian officials often remarked that Asad accepted Soviet arms, but not Soviet advice. Asad keenly understood that the Cold War could be manipulated to the advantage of a small state like Syria to pursue its regional ambitions.

Third, both the US and Syria, distrustful of the other's intentions and alignments, cautiously formed temporary alliances based on short-term common interests.

While 1973 represented a substantial break in their relations, their relations could never be characterized as substantial based on sustained common interests and trust. The United States and Syria, despite their positive overtures, both remained cautiously wary of one another. Washington even had a hand in the 1948 coup that overthrew one of Syria's first post-independence governments. While Asad welcomed the US's overtures, he remained concerned about its bias towards Israel and its past involvement in the region that came at the expense of Syria and its interests in the regions.

At the end of the October War of 1973, Asad initially welcomed Kissinger's commitment to seek a withdrawal on the Golan Heights. The signing of the 1974 disengagement and Nixon's subsequent visit had raised Asad's hopes that Kissinger would deliver on a second disengagement agreement, but this agreement never materialized. With the signing of Sinai II, Asad concluded that he could not trust Kissinger and his promises. Importantly, however, Asad did not break relations with the United States, leaving their relations open in case a situation arose in the future in which engaging the US would be useful.

Such a situation arose in the case of Lebanon. Hafiz al-Asad saw value in engaging the United States on Lebanon's civil war, but, importantly, made his decision to intervene in Lebanon independent of receiving an American "green light." Asad sought the United States' help in brokering an informal agreement between Syria and Israel to avoid triggering an Israeli intervention in Lebanon if Syria did intervene. Asad had no interest in becoming involved in another conflict with Israel in Lebanon. But when Syria intervened in Lebanon, Asad did not initially inform the United States. Damascus saw no real value in seeking a US go-ahead to intervene, because Asad knew the US would not object. Washington essentially

became a *fait accompli* to Syria's intervention. Illustrative of the limits of their relations in relation to Lebanon, Washington did not offer Damascus any financial or military aid to cover the costs of the intervention.

Asad viewed the United States in this period largely as a superpower that was prudent to engage in the wake of the October War of 1973, which could lead to benefits for Syria regionally, but not as a state he could completely trust as a partner or ally. Washington's view of Syria was very similar; Nixon, and then Ford, viewed Syria as a state that needed to be engaged due to the circumstances after the October War. Kissinger could not avoid engaging Damascus because of its relations with Egypt and its role in the wider Arab–Israeli conflict. But Kissinger's expectations for these negotiations were quite low as a result of the decades of animosity between the two states. From the beginning of Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy, Syria was considered a sideshow to his engagement with Egypt, a state he hoped would become an important regional ally in the future.

Kissinger's engagement with Hafiz al-Asad surprised him. The Syrian president was not the leader he expected, and the role Syria was willing to play broke with the assumptions Washington had about Syria's role in the peace process. With the signing of the 1974 disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria and the subsequent formalization of relations, Kissinger concluded that Washington could potentially cooperate with Syria on some regional issues.

Unlike his relations with Sadat, which dated to 1972, Kissinger's relations with Asad were still relatively new, and he observed as well that Asad was a tough negotiator who would not easily make concessions to the United States. Despite Syria's vulnerable position at the end of the 1973 war, Asad negotiated with little sign that he would compromise easily. Kissinger encountered this when, after multiple-hour-long negotiations, Asad refused to attend the Geneva summit in 1973. After obtaining the first disengagement, Kissinger and Ford recognized that a second round would be equally difficult and would have less chance of success because of Israel's refusal to make any substantive concessions on the Golan. Kissinger believed it was important to keep Asad engaged in the peace process to prevent the Syrian president spoiling his diplomatic initiatives with Egypt. Employing even deception, Kissinger repeatedly assured Asad that peace talks would eventually be on the agenda. Ford however gave assurances to Israel on the signing of the Sinai II agreement that the US wouldn't exert pressure on Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights,

The Lebanese Civil War offered another opportunity for the US and Syria to engage one another on common short-term interests. While these two conflicts built a better level of trust between the two states, their relations were predominantly centred on limited security cooperation. These relations set a precedent for their future relations, where areas of consequence brought these two states together on common interests. However, relations never reached the substantive depth that US relations did with Egypt with the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978

Fourth, the Regional conflicts themselves — the Arab–Israeli conflict of 1973–1977 and the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1976 — introduced unanticipated circumstances that would both strengthen and weaken their security cooperation at different times.

As much as this study focuses on the perceptions, strategies, decisions, and actions of a great power and a small state, these conflicts themselves created conditions that neither state expected would have an important impact on their security relations with one another during this period.

The October War of 1973 created the conditions for this engagement. Prior to 1973, Nixon and Kissinger did not consider Syria a state that needed to be engaged in their diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East. Hafiz al-Asad was also not planning on an extensive period of diplomacy with the United States after the October War. He had originally envisaged a military campaign that would secure him the Golan Heights through force, but it was Egypt's betrayal and subsequent military losses which forced him to consider negotiation. Arguably, a war was needed for both states to overcome their perceptions of one another and the roles they could potentially play in the region.

The Lebanese Civil War also changed both states' initial perceptions of one another and impacted their subsequent security cooperation. Kamal Joumblatt's refusal to support Asad's Constitutional Document and the Maronite Christians' wariness of trusting Syria's mediatory process contributed to Asad's decision to align with the Maronite Christian community against the LNM and the PLO. This surprising Syrian alignment allowed the US to support Syria's position in the Lebanese Civil War. Asad's intervention in the summer of 1976 took on a life of its own. As Richard Murphy notes, Asad never planned a long-term occupation of the Lebanese state when Syria intervened in 1976, but as Syria entered the fog

of war in Lebanon, Asad became sucked into a civil war he could not extricate himself from without fearing that such a withdrawal would threaten his own state's security.⁴

It is important, then, to recognize the role of the events as well as the actors involved, in studying security cooperation in regional and international conflicts. This also illustrates the natural limitations of International Relations theory's predictive power, because conflicts have their own dynamics and state actors and their elites rarely anticipate these dynamics.

Areas of Further Research

Further studies of US–Syrian relations will inevitably be published in the years ahead. This study engages a critical period in their relations with the archival materials available at the time of writing this thesis. As the years unfold, other American archival material will become available, which could shed more light on the details of this period. However, as this study has illustrated, the main contours of America's engagement with Syria can be documented with the existing archival material.

In terms of Syrian sources, study of this period could be further enriched with the potential change of government in Syria. If President Bashar al-Asad's regime were to fall, the Syrian government's archival documents from this period, if they were kept in detail, could become public and would be useful to future researchers. The Syrian civil war has added significant constraints on the ability to interview less senior officials from that time, who are in more senior positions now in Syria or who are retired, because of the inability to access Damascus safely. Important figures from this period have also passed away due to natural and unnatural circumstances. The interviews with Abdul Halim Khaddam and Rifaat al-Asad represent, then, some of the few available oral histories of this period.

Lebanese militia sources from the Civil War of 1975–1976 are also limited, due to the subsequent violent events in Lebanon's history. Kamal Joumblatt was assassinated in 1977, Tony Frangieh was assassinated in 1978, and senior Maronite leaders were killed in the early 1980s as the war unfolded; other leaders remain largely inaccessible to a researcher including notably Samir Geagea. This represents a challenge to documenting fully Syrian decision-making in relation to Lebanon and its relations with the different confessional groups.

Syrian political history, on the whole, could also be further examined. The period examined in this study is one fraction of Syria's political history under Hafiz al-Asad. Works could be

⁴ Interview with Richard Murphy.

done, as more documents and sources become available, on the subsequent decades. Syria's political history prior to the rise of Hafiz al-Asad could also be further examined. As Syria enters a new chapter in its history, hopefully, these events will spark a wider interest within Syria and internationally to document Syria's political history. The later years of the Lebanese Civil War and the role of international actors, including the US and Syria, could also be further documented.

In terms of US–Syrian relations, there is a noticeable absence of studies, both looking at the period of relations prior to 1970, and the period subsequently after 1977. Important points in these two states' relations include the Camp David Accords, Israel's intervention in Lebanon in 1982, the Taif Accords, the Gulf War of 1990, the Oslo Accords, and the final peace negotiations President Clinton brokered before Asad's death between Syria and Israel all require further examination.

Finally, this study's introduction of identity and interests as concurrent conceptual lenses in examining state behaviour in the Arab world could be further applied to US–Syrian relations in other periods, but more importantly, to other Arab states which have balanced their state identity with their strategic interests. A number of Arab states, created artificially at the end of the First World War, have struggled to reconcile their states' wider Arab identity with their state-specific interests in pursuit of their foreign policy goals in the region.

A Final Note

US–Syrian relations from 1973 to 1977 marked a critical break in their past relations. While their security cooperation achieved limited results, their relations broadened the conception both states' leaderships had of one another and established a framework for these two states' subsequent relations. The unresolved issues that emerged from this period of their relations served as the main context for their cooperation and conflict in the following decades, even after the death of Hafiz al-Asad in 2000.

Hopefully, when the fighting ends in Syria and Syrians rebuild and look to a brighter future, a new period of their relations could begin and unresolved issues which have been at the heart of Syria's foreign relations with the United States — the status of Syria's borders with Israel, the Palestinians, and Lebanon's domestic politics — could be addressed.

TABLE OF INTERVIEWEES

• **Rifaat al-Asad**, Paris, August 2012. Asad served as Vice President of Syria from 1984 to 1988 and member of the Ba'ath Party Regional Command (1975–1988). Younger brother of Hafiz al-Asad, he commanded the praetorian guard of the Asad regime, the Defence Companies (1971–1984), which were charged with the internal and external protection of the Asad regime and its interest. Asad also had extensive oversight over other internal security units in Syria. Prior to his falling-out with his brother in 1984, Asad's power in Syria was second only to his brother's. Simultaneous translation (Arabic to English) was provided by Sirwar al-Asad, son of Rifaat and cousin of Bashar.

• **Edward P. Djerejian**, Houston, TX, September 2011, Founding Director of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, Rice University (1994–present). Djerejian served as the United States Ambassador to Israel (1993–1994), Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs (1991–1993); US Ambassador to Syria (1989-1991), and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (1986–1988). Djerejian was a career member of the US Foreign Service, and during the time of the thesis, he served as Executive Assistant to Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Joseph Sisco (1972–1975) and Consul General in Bordeaux (1975–1977)

• **Samir Frangieh**, Beirut, Lebanon, December 2012. Frangieh is a senior member of the Frangieh family and a member of the March 14th movement. He served in Parliament from 2005 to 2009, representing Zgharta, Lebanon. Frangieh is a close ally Walid Joumblatt. Frangieh's cousin was Tony Frangieh and his uncle was Suleiman Frangieh. Frangieh has been an active journalist throughout his career. Interview was conducted in English.

• **Richard Herman**, Palm Springs, CA, March 2013. Herman served as Chairman of the Republican Party, Nebraska and a member of the Executive Committee of the Republican National Committee during the Ford Presidency. A friend of Richard Nixon's, he served as Regional Director of Midwestern States for Nixon's 1968 Presidential Campaign and then, chaired the Organizing Committee of the 1973 Republican National Convention in 1972.

• **Abdul Halim Khaddam**, Paris, August 2012. Khaddam served as Vice President of Syria (1984–2005), Interim President of Syria (June–July 2000), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs (1970–1984), Member of the Regional Command of the Ba'ath Party (1970–2005), and Minister of Economy and Trade (1969–1970). Simultaneous translation (Arabic to English) was provided by Fouad Razek, an independent translation consultant and formerly with the BBC.

TABLE OF INTERVIEWEES, CONT.

• **Richard Murphy**, New York, July 2013. A career Ambassador in the US foreign service, Murphy served as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (1983–1989), US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (1981–1983), US Ambassador to the Phillipines (1978–1981), and US Ambassador to Mauritania (1971–1974). He served as the first US Ambassador to Syria (1974–1978) after normalization of relations in 1974.

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