Syria’s Support of Iran in the Gulf War: The Role of Structural Change and the Emergence of a Relatively Strong State

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Syria’s support of Iran in the Gulf War needs explanation, surprising as it has both Arabs and non-Arabs. That Syrian policy is not self-explanatory can be attributed to pre-existing expectations about inter-Arab relations, whereby Arab states would stand by each other whenever challenged by foreign powers, even if those powers happened to be Islamic states. Demonstrating Arab solidarity becomes even more urgent when Israel, considered enemy by most Arab countries, is in an informal alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran – this has manifested itself in military sales and assistance provided by Israel to the Khomeini regime. These pre-existing expectations are derived from the ideology of pan-Arabism, an ideology which influences a number of students of Arab foreign policy.

Another factor, besides pan-Arab solidarity, which presents problems in explaining Syria’s role in the Gulf War, lies in the popularized notion that the Arab Gulf states are fully supportive of Iraq’s war efforts, and thus it is counterproductive for Syria to adopt a policy contrary to their interests, given the generous and continuing economic aid it has been receiving from them since 1970. This expectation is derived from the assumption that Syria is a rentier state whose economy depends on subsidies from the Gulf states. These expectations and a priori theories account for the difficulties of explaining Syria’s Gulf policy.

It is neither the first nor will it be the last time that some of us will discover a given foreign policy decision to be inconsistent with prior expectations, and a priori theory to be disconfirmed by credible evidence. These disappointments often contribute to rethinking assumptions, propositions, and general theories. In this paper,

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I will briefly identify three explanations and then advocate an alternative argument as to the causes behind Syria’s support of Iran against Iraq.

Three Explanations of Syria’s Gulf Policy

The first explanation, which approximates the Syrian official position, is simply ideological. Syria’s support of Iran must be understood as the result of the Iranian Revolution’s opposition to Israel and the United States. The overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty ended the anti-Arab Western alliances which date back to 1956, alliances which stressed encircling the Arab world with neighboring non-Arab countries like Ethiopia, Turkey and Iran. These alliances have undergone two main changes: Arab-Turkish relationships stabilized, a development related more to economic ties with the Arab world than to a change in heart; Ethiopia’s policies also changed mainly due to the decision taken by the Organization of African States to sever ties with Israel and to the later overthrow of the Haile Selassie regime, a change which resulted in the installment of a pro-Soviet government. Thus, when the Iranian Revolution overthrew the Shah’s regime, the third and last non-Arab ally to Israel and the United States was defeated. Syria lost no opportunity in detailing the Shah’s anti-Arab policies such as providing Israel with 60% of its oil needs, the coordination between Mossad (Israel’s Secret Intelligence Service) and Savaak (the Shah’s Intelligence Service), and Iran’s seizure of the Arab islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in the Strait of Hormuz in 1971. Syria also rationalizes its policy by considering Tehran as a substitute for the loss of Egypt after Sadat signed the Camp David Accords and pulled the most populous and strongest of the Arab states out of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The second explanation reduces Syria’s support of Iran against Iraq to the sectarian affinity between the Alawites and the Shiites. Similarly, Syria’s Gulf policy is also seen as a function of the Alawites’ (the sect of most of the Syrian leadership) animosity toward the Muslim Sunnis, the sect to which the Iraqi ruling elite belongs.

The third explanation, which remains the most relevant, stresses the regional rivalry between the two countries. It is derived from the systemic assumptions that states would always struggle for survival and domination. Nothing in either Syrian or Iraqi behavior sheds serious doubt on this proposition.

These explanations merit a brief discussion. The official explanation amounts to mere rationalization of the policy. Simply put, it is propaganda. The sectarian explanation offers a very simplified version of traditional orientalist approaches to Arab politics, according to which Arabs are basically motivated by narrow and non-economic interests, even when it comes to issues of war and peace. Without any doubt, sectarianism under Assad is a fact of Syrian life. Also, it is pointless to deny that the Alawite members of the ruling elite are not influenced by their sectarian background. However, saying that sectarianism is a part of the decision-maker’s cognitive makeup and value system and thus a relevant factor is one thing, considering it as an explanation of his action is another. The correlation between decisions and sectarian backgrounds simplifies highly complex situation. This approach ignores
the difficulty for the ruling elite of carrying out a policy with such a narrow support base as the Alawite community, which makes up not more than 10 percent of the Syrian population. It also ignores the interests, rationally defined, of the Alawite community itself in foregoing not only the Arab world with its Sunni majority, but about more than 60 percent of their fellow-Syrians. Even more incorrect is the premise upon which this explanation is based, namely that the Alawites exclusively control the Syrian government. Finally, regional rivalry can be a convincing explanation only if the conditions which transform it into an actual policy can be specified, a task that will be addressed in this paper.

Syrian politics – foreign policy included – should be viewed in their totality, and any attempt to reduce them into either elite power struggle, sectarianism or ideology is bound to weaken rather than improve our understanding of a country which is relatively under-studied. Hafez al-Assad’s policy in support of Iran, in my judgement, can be explained by two developments which resulted in structural changes that influenced Syria’s support of Iran. One is the rise of the Iranian Revolution and Iraq’s decision to go to war, and second, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The first left Syria with no option but to side with Iran, as the only means to check a regional rival, Iraq. The second resulted in a new distribution of power in Lebanon, a development that led to the emergence of the Shiite community as the second most important force. The Syrians found this force the only one with which they could work, given their strained relationship with the other Lebanese groups. This course of action has reinforced Syria’s Gulf policy, the assistance given to Iran being the price paid for Shiite support of Syrian policies in Lebanon.

A third factor, though it may not qualify as structural, is the emergence of a relatively strong and autonomous Syrian state, something Syria never knew between 1946 and 1970. There is a relationship between the Iranian Revolution and Iraq’s war with Iran on one hand and the relatively strong and autonomous state. Without the latter, the Syrian regime would not have been able to exploit the opportunities created by the Iranian Revolution and the Gulf War. Finally, a fourth factor conducive to the Syrian role in the Gulf is the Syrian-Saudi relationship. While this factor is not on a par with the other three, it could contribute to either raising or lowering the costs of Syria’s Gulf policy, primarily through the use or non-use of Saudi pressure on Syria to reverse its course. Syrian Gulf policy can be explained through these factors, rather than either ideology or Alawite animosity toward the Sunnis and affinity with the Shiites.

The Gulf War Intensifies Conflict Within a New Arab Regional System

During the 1950s and the 1960s, Egypt played a central role in the Arab regional system. Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq had also been members of the system, though their influence was marginal compared with that of Egypt. After the death of President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, however, the regional system underwent important changes. The central role Egypt played before 1967 could not be replayed by Sadat. Thus, a
post-Nasser system emerged with a four major members, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, none of which were capable of playing a central role. This applies even to Saudi Arabia, which emerged as a power to be reckoned with during the 1970s, a development that led some to label that decade as the Saudi era in Arab politics. With no single hegemonic state, the attention focused most on preventing any changes which could alter the balance.

As members in the new regional system, Syria and Iraq engaged in a fierce struggle for power. Nasser’s death created opportunities which could not be ignored by either of the two states. Some of these opportunities were created by Sadat, not because he lacked the charisma of his predecessor, but by decisions like accepting the Sinai II disengagement agreement, the 1977 Jerusalem visit and the 1979 Camp David Accords. Nasser’s influence in Lebanon and in the P.L.O., for example, was unrivalled. Both Iraq and Syria wanted to inherit this legacy. When the Lebanese Civil War erupted in 1975, Iraq was willing to use the influence it enjoyed among some forces of the Lebanese Left and attempted to weaken Syria. Syria fought back by entering Lebanon, not solely to prevent an Iraqi influence, but to prevent an Israeli-controlled Lebanon as well.

Aware of the overwhelming power of his next door neighbor as well as of the threat posed by the Kurdish movement to his regime, Saddam Hussein wanted to stabilize his relationship with the Shah so he could devote his energies to enhance his influence in the Arab world. He indeed normalized relations with Iran through the 1975 Algiers Agreement, a policy the first casualty of which was the Kurdish revolution, whose support by Iran ceased.

With Khomeini’s vehement opposition to the Iraqi regime, and his anti-Israeli rhetoric similar to that coming from Damascus, Syria’s welcome of the revolution was expected. The alliance with Tehran, keeping Saddam Hussein preoccupied with protecting his regime and thus deterring him from interfering in the internal affairs of other Arab states, served Syria’s interests as well as those of some Gulf states who did not appreciate Iraq’s radicalism.

When Iraq launched the war against Iran in September 1980, the gains which Syria appeared to have reaped of the revolution turned out to be in jeopardy. The Iranian army was in a state of disarray after the Shah’s collapse, and the then hostage crisis made Iran a “pariah” state. Syria was quite concerned that an Iraqi victory would be devastating to its interests. Unpopular as it was, Syria had little option but to side with Iran against Iraq. Syria, of course, would have preferred another alliance which could check a would be victorious Iraq, but no Arab partners were willing to join. Jordan might have been an appropriate ally, but as a state bordering Iraq, the Jordanian monarch would not even entertain such an idea. On the contrary, he has been one of the staunchest supporters of Iraq.

Syrian influence in Lebanon cannot be separated from the regional rivalry between the two Baathist states. Maintaining Syrian control over Lebanon is dictated by several considerations. Losing the war over Lebanon and the P.L.O. is tantamount to losing another war with Israel, for it would seriously weaken Syria’s efforts to regain the Golan Heights. But to prevent such a loss, Syria needs a Lebanese base of support.
The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon resulted in changes which strengthen Syria’s link with Tehran. The expulsion of the P.L.O. from Lebanon resulted in weakening the Lebanese Left and the Sunni community. While the Christians were the main beneficiaries of the invasion, the Shiites emerged as the second major group, though not powerful enough to defeat the Christians. Faced with results of the invasion, Syria was in need of reliable local allies, especially since its relationship with the Christians is hostile, with the Druze uneasy and unpredictable, and with the Sunnis ambivalent. In light of the relationships that exist between the different political groups in Lebanon, and between each of them and Syria, the Lebanese Shiites and the Syrians found themselves in need of each other.

The Syrian-Shiite alliance in Lebanon was based less on ideology and more on power calculations. The Shiites would see the alliance as a means to redress their legitimate grievances, but it would be a gross mistake to overlook the Iranian role in bringing Damascus and the Amal Movement together. The logic of the alliance has been based on mutual interests: the Shiites would support Syria’s policy in Lebanon while the Assad regime would return the favor by assisting Tehran in its war against Iraq. This relationship was conducted at various levels, official and non-official. The linkage is by far more explanatory of Syria’s Gulf policy than that which stresses the economic link between Iran and Syria, especially the emphasis given to the 20,000 barrels of oil a day Syria receives as a “free Iranian gift.”

The Emergence of a Relatively Strong Syrian State

As indicated earlier, Assad would not have been able to take the risk of supporting Iran against Iraq had it not been for the significant shift in Syria’s regional role: the transition from a marginal into a major player in Middle Eastern politics. This shift is attributed to the development of a relatively strong and autonomous state, a change that started with Assad’s seizure of power in 1970. Of course, this type of state in Syria ought not be confused with some of the characteristics of strong industrial states: invulnerability to systemic shocks, large economic output which suggest ability to influence the international system, or the existence of an ideological hegemony which diminishes the need for the state’s coercive role. None of these attributes apply to Syria.

The relative strength of the Syrian state should be viewed in a historical context. Is it stronger than those states which preceded it, those controlled by the old elites, the different praetorian elites, and the earlier Baathist elites? The criteria against which relative strength and autonomy will be measured is whether or not foreign policies were at variance with the interests of certain social and economic groups, popular sentiments in the country and even in the power base of the ruling elite. Is the ruling elite cohesive or fragmented, especially in the arena of foreign policy? Is their foreign policy an extension of domestic politics? While some of these questions do overlap, they are being stated for the sake of clarity. I do not pretend to answer them all in this paper. What does follow, however, will show the significant change in Syrian foreign policy, and how a weak state with fragmented polity used foreign policy as a tool in
domestic politics, while a relatively strong state with a fairly cohesive elite adopted a consistent foreign policy, relatively autonomous from domestic politics. This should by no means suggest that the “relative autonomy” is from the social and economic structure. What is meant is that the state, dependent on a relatively strong economic and ideological base, is capable of pursuing policies contrary to the interests of other groups in society.

Post-independence Syrian foreign policy can be divided into two periods. The first, which starts with Syrian independence in 1946 and continues until Assad seized power in 1970, is characterized by a Syria playing a marginal or peripheral role in Arab politics. During that period, Syria was a country in which Arab and non-Arab powers either actively intervened or were invited in by the polarization, chaos, and instability which marked her policy. The struggle for Syria even took extreme forms. Not only did outside forces want to change a given direction in Syria’s foreign policy, but they went as far as easily changing regimes through military coups, three of which took place in 1949. The class coalition which ruled Syria (mainly the result of co-presence of feudal and capitalist modes of production) was so weak that in order to hold power its members were willing to even using foreign policy as a means in domestic politics, thus playing with decisions on key issues like the union with Iraq, the Baghdad Pact, and the Eisenhower Doctrine. This weakness reached its apotheosis in 1958 when they agreed on dissolving Syria as a sovereign entity, by unifying her with Egypt into the United Arab Republic.

Despite serious blows to the old elite during the union period 1958-1961, and the 1963-1970 Baathist period, the Syrian state remained vulnerable to military intervention in politics, and had a fragmented elite which lacked any consensus on a wide-range of foreign policy issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, relations with other Arab states, and restoring the union with Egypt. This weakness reached its zenith during the 1970 Jordanian civil war, when each faction of the Syrian Baathist elite adopted a foreign policy of its own. One faction, led by Salah Jedid, wanted to intervene on behalf of the embattled Palestinians, while the other, led by Assad, used his power as the then Minister of Defense to withhold air cover for the intervening troops.

The second period did not start until Hafez al-Assad launched what has been officially called the “Corrective Movement” in November, 1970. During this period, Syria’s regional role was transformed from a marginal into a major player in Middle Eastern politics. After 1970, Assad ended Syria’s isolation, established detente with Arab conservative states, opened up to Western governments and markets, rebuilt the armed forces, and had the willingness to take unpopular initiatives and even risks, a characteristic starkly distinguishing him from his predecessors.

Foremost of these policies is Syria’s support of Iran against Iraq. But this policy is neither an aberration nor an isolated decision. It is consistent with other policies, like the 1976 intervention in Lebanon on behalf of the Phalangist Party against the forces of the Lebanese National Movement and the P.L.O., and consistent also with the war against the P.L.O. under the leadership of Yasir Arafat.

This major shift in Syria’s role can be explained by the development of a state capitalist or, as some call it a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime whose major support
base are the Army and the Party. This regime succeeded in developing a relatively strong state, a powerful and dominant party role with a populist ideology, and a new alliance between the state and some fractions of the bourgeoisie. This change resulting in a strong state with a stable base of support, accounts for policies like supporting Iran.

This development was due to important changes which took place inside Syria, and some of them can be dated to the early Baathist rule between 1963 and 1970. The central role the state plays in the economy bears upon its relative strength and consequently on its ability to insure the support of different social and political groups for both domestic and foreign policies. The state controls over 50 percent of the economy, compared with about 27 percent in the mid-1960s, and 8 percent in the 1950s. The Syrian regime, which can be called a state capitalist, concentrated the economic power in the hands of the Syrian state, represented most by the civil servants, public-sector employees, and the military.

Understanding the centrality of the economic role the state plays in Syrian society can help explain the absence of a significant opposition to its Gulf policy. With the exception of the Hamma Revolt in 1982, the Baathist regime encountered minor and ineffective opposition. Does this mean that the majority of the Syrian people are committed to Iran against Iraq? Presenting the question in this way may be misleading, and unfortunately many people base their conclusions on the answers elicited by it. This question goes directly to the individual’s feelings and cultural values, to his subconscious, and offers no revelation of a solid majority against Syria’s support of Iran. Public opinion may be relevant, but not the source of foreign policy. Syrian foreign policy is shaped less by ideological and sentimental considerations and more by economic factors. The stakes the Syrian regime created for a large proportion of the population left it with the option to choose between its own popular values, such as a belief in pan-Arabism, and economic interests. The evidence indicate that the population is not willing to tradeoff economic interests for Arab nationalist solidarity with Iraq.

Unlike many Latin-American dictatorships, which are labelled authoritarian regimes, the Syrians made use of ideology and a strong party organization. The Baathist ideology is populist and appeals to salient values in Syrian society, values like unity, freedom, and even socialism. There is almost an entire generation of Syrians who have been exposed to this ideology. The party carried out an extensive process of political socialization, a process that has been applied to the army as well. The organizational structure of the party has been of significant importance, particularly in integrating some Leninist principles of organization. Moreover, the party established a network of mass organizations in villages and towns. These measures provided Assad with what the old elite lacked, a popular ideology and disciplined party which could be used to control and defuse conflict at different levels of society. The functions of ideology and party becomes even more important in the case of the Iran-Iraq War. The task is to rationalize, to come out with ideological explanations that the state is pursuing a policy which is consistent with the basic premises of the Baathist doctrine. These resources appear to have also accounted for the regime’s longevity – it will
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to its nineteenth year this month.

With this base of support, the Assad regime is not likely to reverse its Gulf policy or to be deterred from pursuing similar policies. The regime, however, adopts a different attitude when the policies contemplated are of economic nature. Although the regime remains authoritarian in several respects, it has shown willingness to address economic problems. Most important are the changes which occurred a few months ago in Syria, resulting in cabinet reshuffling and in putting some ministers on trial for corruption. Provided the centrality of the economy in Syrian domestic and foreign policy, the regime is unwilling to take any risks on the economic front, and it is not a mere coincidence that these recent changes took place after Syria’s current economic problems had become a daily item of discussion at home and abroad.

The Syrian-Saudi Relationship Lowers the Costs of Assad’s Support of Iran

Many observers paid extensive attention to Saudi-Syrian relations as a result of Assad’s support of Iran. There were several reports about Saudi pressure on Syria to reverse course in the Gulf. It is difficult to predict how much of an influence Saudi pressure would have had. One can, however, indicate the level of Saudi Arabia’s opposition to Syria’s support of Iran. The argument here is that the Saudis appear not to have found it in their interest to apply the maximum pressure on Syria as a result of its Gulf policy. Obviously, there are several reasons for this Saudi reluctance.

One of the reasons for the continued friendship between Syria and Saudi Arabia despite the former’s Gulf policy can be explained in the context of Saudi Arabia’s relations with Iraq. The Syrian-Saudi relationship had been much smoother than those with Iraq, at least until 1980. Saudi Arabia was quite pleased with Assad’s takeover of power in Syria. He became an asset, someone they could use to check Iraqi radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s. In those days, Iraq gave a haven to Saudi Baathist groups opposed to the Saudi regime, allowing them to publish anti-monarchical literature, and even providing them at one time with a radio station which broadcast to Saudi Arabia.

Israel is a factor in the Saudi-Syrian relationship. This is not to say that the Saudis are naive enough to expect the Syrians to defend them and protect their oil fields. While they may not expect Syrian protection, they are aware that in case of an Israeli incursion into Saudi Arabia, the Syrians cannot afford to stand by, not out of Arab solidarity as much as a concern not to be seen as indifferent to an attack on the holy places.

Saudi satisfaction with Assad had a lot to do with reversing the policies of the Neo-Baath, his radical predecessors who wanted to change the whole Arab world. Unlike his predecessors, Assad wanted to maintain the status quo. Saudi support for a Syrian role in Lebanon is a case in point. What was to be prevented in Lebanon was not only a Leftist-Muslim victory, but that of a coalition of radical forces that have little sympathy and appreciation of the Saudi monarchy. Were these groups to win,
their impact would very likely be felt beyond the Lebanese borders. Illustrative of this is that when the Lebanese Civil War erupted, the Saudi press called the Christian forces *al-Quwaat al-Iniza‘ia* [isolationist forces]. However, after Syria intervened on their behalf, the language of the Saudi press changed into calling the Christian forces Phalangist, a more neutral name.

Of further significance is the Saudi attitude itself toward Tehran, despite Iranian anti-Saudi rhetoric. The Saudis maintained only low key opposition to Iran. It took the events in Mecca to force the Saudi monarch to be open about his country’s willingness to face the Iranian challenge and embark on heavy armaments, including CSS-2 ballistic missiles capable of striking targets more than 1,600 miles away. The same can be said about the United Arab Emirates which maintained almost normal relations with Iran during the course of the war. While these policies are very much shaped by Saudi and Gulf considerations, they carry a meaning and send a message to Syria. Put simply, if the Gulf states – with the exception of Kuwait which was the most active in her opposition to Syria in words and deeds – have rather been ambivalent toward Iraq during most of the eight-year old war, Syria is likely to be less seriously concerned about opposing Iraq. More important than this, however, remains the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria, a relationship which has been shaped by important interests, although supporting Iran is not one of them.

Saudi Arabia is not a determining factor in Syria’s foreign policy. What the Saudis could do is either raise or lower the costs of Syria’s Gulf policy. Apparently, Saudi Arabia chose to lower the costs of Assad’s support of Iran.