THE STRATEGIC CULTURE OF IRREDENTIST SMALL POWERS: THE CASE OF SYRIA

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STRATEGIC CULTURE DEFINED

Strategic culture is that set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.

STRATEGIC CULTURE PROFILE

Summary Description of Syria's Strategic Culture

By virtue of its leading role in the Arab national movement, Syria's strategic culture is rooted in its view of itself as the champion of Arab rights against what it perceives to be Western penetration of the Middle East, with Israel as its bridgehead. That perception is derived from Syria's bitter experience with Western colonial powers, especially Britain, which first fragmented the Middle East, then colonized it, and later supported European Jews in the usurpation of Palestine. It is also derived from Syria's frustration with the United States, which provides Israel massive military, political, and economic support – even as Israel occupies Arab territories in violation of United Nations Security Council land-for-peace resolutions.

With the advent of the more pragmatic Hafez Assad regime in 1970, Syria limited its objectives vis-à-vis Israel: from the liberation of Palestine to the recovery of the Arab territories Israel occupied during the 1967 war (and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza). To this end, Assad sought to enhance Syria's bargaining position by attempting to reach strategic parity with Israel through the bolstering of Syria's offensive and defensive capabilities and by using militant anti-Israel groups as instruments of Syria's power. With the collapse of Syria's former Soviet patron, Syria's efforts to reach strategic parity with Israel came to a halt. Upon Assad's death in June 2000, all his son and successor Bashar could do to defend Syria was to rely on Syria's aging military equipment, the deterrent threat of Syria's chemical weapons, and the ability to mobilize militant anti-Israel groups.

Factors Shaping Syria's Strategic Culture

Geography

      Syria's political geography is an important factor in shaping Syria's strategic culture: Whereas Greater Syria once included contemporary Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, contemporary Syria has been hemmed in by artificial boundaries that Britain and France imposed on it following their Word War I victory over the Ottoman Empire.[1] Moreover, Syria's only natural defensive barrier, the mountainous Golan Heights, was occupied by Israel during the Six-Day War in 1967.

Origins, Sources, "Shared Narrative"

      History is another factor that shaped Syria's strategic culture. The origins of Syria's strategic culture are rooted in Syria's bitter experience with Western colonial powers. According to the Syrian narrative, Britain betrayed the Arabs by failing to fulfill its World War I promise to the Syrian-backed *Emir* (Prince) Hussain, *Sharif* (governor) of Mecca, to support an independent Arab state in return for an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire.[2] Instead, following the defeat and demise of the Ottoman Empire, Britain took over former Ottoman territories and, together with France, Britain's wartime ally, divided them into separate political units which the two European powers then colonized: Britain took over Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq, and France occupied Syria and Lebanon. Adding insult to injury, the British promised the Jewish people a "national home" in Palestine, until then southern Syria.[3]

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[1] British and French diplomats agreed on the division of Greater Syria (contained in the secret Sykes-Picot agreement) as early as 1916. The treaty became publicly known only in 1917 as a result of its leaking by the Bolsheviks. For further reading on this question, see Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israel Conflict*, 5th ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), pp. 64-67.

[2] Syrian officers backed the Sharif because of the prestige of his position (Guardian of the Holy shrines) and the legitimacy it would confer upon their cause. For the Brtish promise to the Arabs, see the Husayn-MacMahon correspondence in smith, Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict, p. 91. The literature on this subject is massive, but for a concise description, see Smith, Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, pp. 55-84.

[3] On the British promise to the Jews, see the Balfour Declaration in Smith, Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, pp. 67-69.

Relationships to Other Groups

Syria's bitter experience with Western colonial powers is a critical component of Syria's worldview. Following the dismemberment of Greater Syria and the loss of Palestine, Syria's relationship with both state and non-state actors became function of their relations with the newly created Jewish state. This goes a long way in explaining both Syria's anti-Western predisposition and its support for militant anti-Israel guerrilla groups.

Unlike the US, Israel, and several Western states which consider anti-Israel groups as "terrorist organizations," Syria (along with other Arab and several Third World states) view them as legitimate national resistance movements struggling to end Israel's illegal occupation of their lands. Syria also uses these groups as leverage against independent minded Palestinian organizations (i.e., Fatah, the mainstream Palestinian organization) to prevent the latter from adopting a separate Palestinian-Israeli deal that might, according to Syrian thinking, weaken the broader Arab front against Israel. Alternatively, Damascus uses these groups to derail diplomatic initiatives that fail to take Syrian interests (i.e., the recovery of the Golan Heights) into account.

However, Syria (under the two Assads) consistently denied militant Palestinian groups the right to use Syrian territory as a base from which to launch operations against Israel. This policy is part and parcel of Syria's broader security policy of scrupulously adhering to the terms of the disengagement of forces agreement with Israel that former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brokered in 1974 following the 1973 war.

Threat Perception

Threat perception is yet another factor shaping Syria's strategic culture. From a Syrian perspective, Israel (which is located only 40 miles southwest of the Syrian capital of Damascus) represents the greatest threat to both Syrian security and regional security.

Syria (along with other Arab states) and Israel went to war in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. During the "Six-Day War" in June 1967, Israel occupied Syria's Golan Heights, Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, and the West Bank of the Jordan River (Palestinian territory that had been administered by Jordan since 1948). In 1982, Syria and Israel confronted each other in Lebanon. Although Syria and Israel engaged in peace talks during the 1990s as part of the Middle East peace process, the peace talks failed, Israel continued to occupy the Syrian Golan, and the two states continue to be locked in a state of war.

Syria's sense of threat springs from Israel's territorial aggrandizement that has been sustained by Israel's U.S.-backed superior conventional military power. That sense of threat is heightened by Israel's nuclear power. Most public estimates of Israel's nuclear capability range between 100-200 weapons,[4] but one analyst, Harold Hough, concludes that the Israeli nuclear arsenal contains as many as 400 deliverable nuclear and thermonuclear weapons.[5] Furthermore, Israel has an active chemical weapons program, including the production of mustard and nerve agents, and a biological warfare capability.

To make matters worse, although Syria, along with 185 other states, signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (the Non-Proliferation Treaty or NPT) in force since 1970, Israel is the only country in the Middle East not among the signatories to that treaty.

On a broader level, Syria feels vulnerable to its U.S.-dominated regional security environment. In addition to Washington's massive military, political and economic support to Israel, the United States extends its tentacles throughout the region. A quick glance at the map buttresses this argument: To Syria's north is Turkey—a powerful U.S. ally and NATO member—with which Syria has traditionally had a tense relationship. Syria and Turkey share 714 miles of border. Although Syrian-Turkish relations improved significantly after Bashar Assad's landmark visit to Turkey in January 2004, some of the underlying issues that divide the two states have not been entirely resolved.[6] Moreover, Turkey and Israel—Syria's arch-rival— are allies and, by the terms of their strategic alliance, Turkish authorities allow the Israeli air force to train in Turkish airspace, close to northern Syria.[7]

To Syria's east lies Iraq, with which Syria shares some 376 miles of border and where the United States has deployed 140,000 troops since March 2003. Although Syria views the

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[4] See, for example, Amy Dockser Marcus, "Growing Dangers: US Drive to Curb Doomsday Weapons in Mideast Is Faltering," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 1966, p. A1. For a more detailed account of Israel's nuclear capability, see Rodney W. Jones and Mark G. McDonough, *Tracking Nuclear Proliferation*, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1998), chapter 7.

[5] Harold Hough, "Could Israel's Nuclear Assets Survive A First Strike?" *Jane's Intelligence Review*, September 1997, p. 410.

[6] One of the major issues dividing Syria and Turkey is the question of riparian rights over the Euphrates River. Another issue is the territorial dispute over the province of Alexandretta (known as "Hatai" to Turks; "Iskenderun" to Syrians). That province was ceded by France to Turkey in 1939 in order to entice Turkey to not enter into an alliance with Nazi Germany. Syria was them under the French mandate, and Syrians were not consulted. For further reading, see Murhaf Jouejati, "Water Politics As High Politics: The Case of Turkey and Syria," in *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, Henri J. Barkey, ed., (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 1996), pp. 131-146.

[7] For further reading on the Turkey-Israel alliance, see Gregory A. Burris, "Turkey-Israel: speed Bumps," *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. X, No. 4 (Fall 2003).

American military presence in Iraq as a threat to its security, Syria's Iraqi challenge predates the U.S. occupation of that country. In addition to the personal animus between the late Syrian leader Hafez Assad and Iraq's ousted leader, Saddam Hussein, and to the ideological competition that pitted the two rival factions of the Ba'th Party that dominated the two states, Syria and Iraq have for a long time been locked in a classic geo-political rivalry.[8] As a result, the two states tried to destabilize each other during the 1970s and 1980s and came close to armed conflict on several occasions. Moreover, Saddam Hussein's ability and willingness to use chemical weapons against Iraq's Kurdish minority and against Iran heightened Syria's threat perception.

To the south, Syria shares a 300 mile border with Jordan, a state with which Syria maintains an uneasy relationship in large part because the Jordanian elite is among Washington's closest Arab allies and often does its bidding.

Finally, off Syria's western coastline, the US Sixth fleet is firmly anchored in the Mediterranean. In these circumstances, it is easy to understand why Syria feels the need to be strong. It is also easy to understand why Syria maintained a sizeable force inside Lebanon, Syria's western neighbor, until 2005, when the UN Security Council, at the behest of the US and France, ordered Syria to withdraw its troops from that country.[9]

Ideology and Religion

Islam is the religion of the majority of Syrians. In its essence, Islam, like Christianity, recognizes the concept of "just war." *Jihad* (Holy war) by force of arms may be either defensive—to defend oneself from attack—or offensive—to liberate the oppressed. But Islam emphasizes the defensive aspects of jihad rather than the offensive ones. The dictates of Islamic law include such principles as advance notice, discrimination in selecting targets, and proportionality. With regard to weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Islam is highly likely to prohibit their use as these weapons do not discriminate between civilian and military targets. It is

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[8] For the best account of the Syrian-Iraqi rivalry, see Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th Versus Ba'th: The Conflict Between Syria and Iraq*, 1968-1989 (St. Martin's Press, 1991).
[9] Syria's military intervention in Lebanon in 1975-76 to stop the Lebanese civil war was mandated by the Arab League. Syrian forces remained in Lebanon until UNSCR 1559, adopted on 2 September 2004, called for Syria's withdrawal and the disarming of Lebanese and non-Lebanese armed groups.

on this basis that senior Iranian officials have denied that Iran is pursuing the development of nuclear weapons.[10]

However, since there were no WMD when the Koran was written (there are no Koranic verses that deal with this issue specifically) there has been no systematic work by Muslim scholars on the ethical issues surrounding the use of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, despite the fact that several Muslim states possess at least some of these weapons.

Still, there is general agreement that since the enemies of Islam possess such weapons, Muslim countries are justified in acquiring them, but only for purposes of deterrence and, if used, as a second strike weapon.[11]

Whatever the case, Islamic doctrine does not appear to have a significant impact on the Syrian elites' strategic calculations. As we shall see, they have been more influenced by Arab nationalism's secular ideology.

Economics

Syria's economic base is too slim to support its foreign and security policies. Although the Syrian economy has enjoyed a good rate of growth, it remains transitional. Mainly agrarian, it has only a modest industrial sector.

Under the radical Ba'th (1966-1970), Syria embarked on a socialist course that sought to curb economic ties to the West, seen as obstacles to integrated national development and constraints on a nationalist foreign policy. A new state-dominated economy emerged, aimed at self-sufficiency but supported by the former Soviet bloc. The regime's simultaneous commitment to an ambitious development program, populist welfare, and a militant foreign policy put severe strains on its resources.[12]

Under Hafez Assad, Syria was forced to rebuild ties to the Western market and Gulf countries in a search for new resources. Unabated growth in military, investment, and consumption expenditures made Syria increasingly dependent on external economic support,

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[10] According to Mohamed Mehdi Zahedi, Iran's Minister of Science, Research and Technology, "Islamic doctrine does not allow us to produce mass destruction weapons or nuclear ones and the Iranian state is based on that principle." *Associated Press*, "Iranian Minister: WMD Outlawed in Islam," 27 June, 2006. This statement followed a similar statement made by Iran's foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi before the Iranian Parliament on 8 June, 2006.

[11] "Islamic Laws On War And Peace," www.federationpress.com.au/pdf/**IslamicLaws**on**War**Peace.pdf, p. 59.

[12] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Revisionist Dreams, Realist Strategies: The Foreign Policy of Syria," in *The Foreign Policy of Arab States*, Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, eds., (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1984), pp. 285-287.

chiefly from the Arab oil-producing countries and the former Soviet bloc. This support was crucial in sustaining Syria's foreign policy stance, but Syria's dependence was also a constraint on policy, diluted only by its distribution among several ideologically disparate sources. Dependence on Saudi Arabia, in particular, had a powerful moderating effect on Syrian policy.[13]

Although low oil prices in the late 1990s forced Saudi Arabia and other Arab oil producing states to reduce their economic assistance to Syria, the recent shift towards a market economy promises to further moderate Syrian policy. Indeed, the economic reforms that Bashar Assad's administration has put in place since coming to power in July 2000 are designed to integrate Syria into the world market economy. To date, the Syrian government has given the private sector more space, including the establishment of private banks, private insurance companies, and in the near future, a stock market.[14] Despite the financial benefits and projected growth that this shift is likely to produce, there is little likelihood that Syrian economy will be able to sustain its foreign policy and security objectives, especially that Syria's oil deposits are projected to dry up in 2010.[15]

Type of Government/Leadership Structure

In its constitutional provisions, Syria's presidential system makes the president the center of power. The president is supreme commander, declares war, concludes treaties, proposes and vetoes legislation, and may rule through decree under emergency powers. He appoints vice presidents, prime ministers, and the Council of Ministers—the cabinet or "government"—which may issue "decisions" having the force of law. The president enjoys a vast power of patronage that makes legions of officials beholden to him and ensures the loyalty and customary deference of the state apparatus. Presidential appointees include army commanders, the heads of the security apparatus, senior civil servants, heads of autonomous agencies, governors, newspaper editors, university presidents, judges, major religious officials, and public sector managers. Through the Council of Ministers, over which he may directly preside, the president commands the sprawling state bureaucracy and can personally intervene at any level to achieve his objectives if the chain of command proves sluggish.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] "Syria Slams Private, Public Monopolies," *The Daily Star*, 19 October, 2005.

[15] Syria's oil production has recently dropped from 600,000 b/d to 450,000 b/d. Revenues from oil exports account for 70% of GNP.

The president is chief legislator, the dominant source of major policy innovation. He can legislate by decree during "emergencies" (a condition loosely defined) and when parliament is not in session. He can also put proposals to the people in plebiscites that always give such proposals overwhelming approval. The president normally controls a docile majority in parliament, which regularly translates his proposals into law. His control of parliament stems from his ability to dismiss it at will and from his leadership of the ruling Ba'th Party that dominates it.

Finally, the president bears primary responsibility for the defense of the country and is the supreme commander of the armed forces. He presides over the National Security Council, which coordinates defense policy and planning, and assumes operational command in time of war.

That said, although policy making in Syria appears to be a one man show, Syria's presidential system includes a powerful subsystem in the form of the Ba'th Party.[16] The influence of the Ba'th Party is clearly spelled out in the Syrian constitution which states that the Ba'th Arab Socialist Party is the leading party in the state. It leads a National Progressive Front (NPF) whose duty is "to mobilize the potentials of the masses and place them in the service of the Arab nation's objectives."[17] According to the Syrian Constitution, therefore, the Ba'th Party is the core institutional unit in the Syrian political system. And although in theory the Ba'th is supposed to share power with other political parties in the NPF, in reality it remains the primary institutional actor. Indeed, the charter of the NPF unequivocally states that political activity, except by the Ba'th, is prohibited in the two sensitive sectors of society, the armed forces and the educational institutions.[18]

The influence of the Ba'th Party in Syria's decision-making process furthermore relates to Assad's own perception of his role vis-à-vis the party. For example, much of the Assad regime's legitimacy rests on the system of values advocated by the Ba'th. Thus, to undermine the influence and prestige of the party could lead to the weakening of the regime itself. Consequently, the two

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[16] The term "Ba'th" means "renaissance" or "rebirth" in Arabic, hence, the rebirth of the Arab Nation.
[17] Antoine Guine, *The New Syria* (Damascus: SAMA, 1975), p. 103.
[18] Articles 7 and 9 of the Charter, published in Damascus by the National Command of the Ba'th Arab Socialist Party, Bureau of Documentation, Information and Broadcast, 7 March 1972.

institutions of the presidency and the party in Syria tend to be interdependent, relying on each other for ideological credibility and political survival.[19]

It is very unlikely, therefore, for Assad to take an important decision unilaterally without consulting the top leadership of the party, whose members are frequently involved in high-level consultations.

Still, the individuals who make up the Syrian political elite and who participate in decision-making do not have an independent power base of their own. Rather, they derive their power from their access to the president. Moreover, in recent years, the Ba'th Party has been downgraded, de-ideologized and turned into a patronage machine with little capacity for independent action.[20] It has not made key foreign policy decisions in a long time.[21]

In sum, although Assad was somewhat constrained in the formulation of foreign policy, he was nonetheless the central figure in the decision-making process.

Characteristics of Syria's Strategic Culture

From Multiple to Single Strategic Culture

Syria's strategic culture is a reflection of its multiple, transient identities: On the one hand, Syrians regard themselves as Arab. On the other hand, they are fragmented along ethnic, sectarian, and urban/rural lines. Despite 60 years of independence, a purely Syrian identity is only now beginning to emerge. As we shall see, the question of identity has had a significant impact on Syria's strategic culture.

That Syrians should identify themselves as Arab is natural. Syria is part of the Arab hinterland with which it shares language, religion, and culture. In the absence of political boundaries prior to the collapse of the Ottoman empire, these shared values helped construct an imagined community, with Damascus at its center, extending far beyond Syria's actual boundaries – an imagined community that survived the fragmentation of Greater Syria. Thus, when Syria gained its independence from France in 1946, Syrians scoffed at the boundaries of their new state. After all, the new truncated Syria was but an artificial creation of Western Imperialism.

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[19] Adeed I. Dawisha, "Syria and the Sadat Initiative," *World Today*, Vol. 34, No. 5 (May 1978), p. 194.
[20] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Asad's Syria and the New World Order: The Struggle for Regime Survival," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1993), p. 2.
[21] Hinnebusch, "Syria: The Politics of Peace and Regime Survival," p. 78.

From then on, however, a gradual decline in Syria's supra-national and sub-national identification has taken place. Simultaneously, Syria's modernization schemes gradually led to the emergence of a purely Syrian identity. Indeed, with the establishment of a network of roads linking cities, towns, and rural areas; a public education system whereby Syrians study from the same textbooks; a central legal system, etc., the inhabitants of Syria have come to share in a new, purely Syrian experience.

Rate of Change /What Causes Change?

This gradual shift—from an Arab to a Syrian identity—has had a significant impact on Syria's strategic culture. Whereas Syria once viewed itself as the champion of Arab rights, Arabism has declined as a determinant of Syria's external action. Rather, Syria under Hafez Assad acted increasingly along statist lines, albeit never entirely: the Ba'th party tended to act as a counter-balance to Assad's more pragmatic approach, and, as a result, policies were frequently a compromise between the party's gravitation towards ideological orthodoxy and political militancy and Assad's tendency towards pragmatic solutions. This is not to imply that the late Syrian leader lacked ideological commitment, but, enacting a different role from the party ideologue, his interpretation of ideological imperatives was balanced by an appreciation of prevalent environmental constraints, and consequently tended to be more pragmatic and flexible.

Who Maintains the Culture?

The Ba'th Party is the gate keeper of Syria's Arab nationalist culture, but it is the security apparatus and the military wing of the Ba'th party that maintain Syria's strategic culture.

The Ba'th Party is the brainchild of two French-educated Syrian intellectuals – Michel Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, a Sunni Muslim. It was officially established in Damascus on 7 April 1947 when its first congress approved its constitution and established its executive committee.

The Ba'th Party's ideology is pan-Arab, secular nationalism. The "Unity" of Arab states is at the core of Ba'th doctrine and prevails over its second and third objectives: those of "Freedom" and "Socialism," respectively. According to Aflaq, the Arab peoples form a single nation with the aspiration of becoming a state with its own specific role in the world. Although

persuaded of the importance of secularity, Aflaq recognized the impact of Islam. He also advocated socialism and, in 1953, the Ba'th Party merged with Akram Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party—a Hama-based political party that sought to promote peasant rights vis-à-vis large landowners. The merger—the Ba'th Arab Socialist Party—created a broader based movement. On 8 March 1963, the Ba'th Military Committee seized power in Syria in a military coup. One month earlier, the Ba'th Party seized power in Iraq.

Ba'thist ideology spread slowly by educating followers to its intellectual attractions. Significant expansion beyond Syria's borders took place only after the war of 1948, when lack of Arab unity was widely perceived as partly responsible for the loss of Palestine to the new state of Israel. The Iraqi branch of the Ba'th Party was established in 1954.

Ba'th Party presence in the armed forces is separate but parallel to that in the civilian apparatus. The two wings (civilian and military) of the Ba'th Party join only at the Regional Command, to which both military and civilian members belong, and where delegates from party organizations in military units meet at regional congresses. The military wing of the Ba'th Party has established branches down to the battalion level. The leader of such a branch is called a *Tawjihi* (political guide). The *Tawjihi* is a full-time party cadre with specialized training in indoctrination. He is not the Commander, and the Commander may not be a *Tawjihi*. Moreover, not all military officers were party members, but it was almost a prerequisite for advancement to flag rank.

According to the organizational report submitted to the ninth Regional Congress (June 2000), the number of Ba'th Party branches, sections, and divisions within the armed forces were, respectively, 27; 212; and 1656.

What does it Say About the "Enemy?"

Since the Ba'th party, through its avowedly Arab nationalist ideology, has perceived itself as the guardian of all Arab nationalist causes, its position on Israel has always been vociferously militant. Thus, Israel is viewed as the scion of Western imperialism, a Western bridgehead of sorts into the Arab world. In this view, Israel is an aggressive, expansionist, settler-colonial state: Israel colonized Palestine, tossed out a segment of Palestine's local inhabitants from their ancestral homes, maintained a brutal occupation over another segment and,

at various times, invaded each and every one of its neighbors, occupying parts of their territory in flagrant violation of international law.[22]

What does it Say About Conflict and the International System, the Utility of Violence, and the Laws of War?

Although Syria is a leading member of the nonaligned movement—Third World states that refused to be part of either of the two blocs during the Cold War—Syria aligned itself with the former Soviet Union in the early 1980s through a "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation." This was not out of ideological affinity but rather in reaction to the U.S. strategic alliance with Israel. Given the zero-sum nature of Syria's perceptions vis-à-vis Israel, and given the benefits that accrue to Israel from the special U.S.-Israeli relationship, Syria prefers the bi-polar international system to the current U.S.-dominated international system.

That said, even under the bipolar system, the thrust of Syrian policy was that a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict could be achieved only if the United States persuaded Israel to abide by UN land-for-peace resolutions, specifically UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 (which require Israel to withdraw from territories it occupied during the 1967 conflict and Arab states to recognize Israel). To this end, Syria used the "carrot and stick" approach with Washington. On the one hand, Syria tried to befriend the United States, the only power that has sufficient leverage over Israel, so as to demonstrate to Washington that Syria can be a useful and stabilizing force in the Middle East. Syria's intervention in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war of 1975/76 on the side of right wing Lebanese forces (against the Palestinian/leftist Lebanese coalition) is one case in point; Syria's successful efforts in the release of American hostages in Lebanon during the 1980s is another; Syria's participation alongside the U.S.-led coalition of forces in Iraq in 1991 is yet another.

On the other hand, Syria employed violence-by-proxy to torpedo any U.S. diplomatic initiative that did not take Syrian interests (namely the recovery of the Golan Heights) into account. The U.S.-brokered 17 May 2006 agreement between Lebanon and Israel is one case in point.

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[22] Article II of the United Nations Charter speaks of the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force." In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel, according to the Syrian perspective, acquired Arab territories in June 1967 purely by force.

Underlying this realist strategy is Syria's conviction that a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, one that fully restores Arab rights, could be had only if Arabs back their diplomacy with teeth. Within this context, while Syria generally abided by international law, it occasionally resorted to violence, albeit indirectly.

STRATEGIC CULTURE IN ACTION

The Role of Strategic Culture in Syria's Security Orientation, Organization, and Decision-Making Process

Syria's strategic culture is critical in shaping its security orientation. The conflict with Israel facilitated the military establishment's hold on political power in general and on the Ba'th party in particular.

Organization

Organizationally, the Ba'th party is of a pyramidal structure, at the top of which lie the Regional (Syrian) and National (Arab) Commands. In addition to Assad, who acts as the Ba'th Party's secretary-general, the twenty-one man Regional Command includes influential members of the policy-making elite. Parallel to the Regional Command is the twenty-one man National Command, whose sphere of responsibility lies in the foreign sector, particularly with the Arab world.[23]

Although the Regional Command is the highest decision-making body, and although its members represent the party's top elite, this body stands on the third level of the Syrian regime's power structure. At the first level is Assad, who concentrates all the critical threads in his hands. Immediately below him are the chiefs of the multiple intelligence and security networks, which function independently of one another, enjoy broad latitude, and keep a close watch on everything in the country that is of concern to the regime. They form in effect Assad's eyes and ears. On the same second level, and also directly answerable to Assad, are the commanders of the politically relevant, regime-shielding, coup-deterring, elite armed formations, such as the

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[23] The number of members of the Regional Command was reduced to 15 following the twentieth Ba'th Party Congress in June 2005. Reports according to which the Ba'th Congress would shut down the National Command were not confirmed.

Republican Guard, the Special Forces, the Third Armored Division. It is these formations, which alone are allowed in the capital, that constitute the essential underpinning of Assad's power.[24]

Further below, on the third level, stands the Regional Command. Except for Assad, who is its secretary general, its members scarcely compare in importance to the intelligence chiefs or commanders of the elite forces. In essence, the Regional Command serves as a consultative body for Assad and at the same time watches, through the party machine, over the proper implementation of his policies by the elements on the fourth level, namely, the ministers, the higher bureaucrats, the provincial governors, the members of the executive boards of the local councils, and the leaders of the party's ancillary mass organizations and their subordinate organs.[25]

Decision-Making

In his capacity as Regional Secretary, Assad chairs all Regional Command meetings. When he is absent, the assistant regional secretary substitutes for him. In consultation with Assad, the assistant secretary sets the agenda for the meetings.

A degree of open deliberation is allowed. The various sides to a complex issue are heard and different or opposite claims are weighed. Criticism of the way certain policies are implemented is also tolerated. This does not conflict with Assad's interests, but helps him formulate more workable or meaningful policies and to exercise his power in a smoother manner. The side to which he lends his weight prevails.

One key difference with regard to the importance of the Regional Command and that of its members has to with the different styles of the two Assads: Whereas Hafez Assad consulted with Regional Command members and took their views into account, Bashar Assad has increasingly used this body as a rubber stamp.

Historical Events That Have Been Determined by Syria's Strategic Culture

That Syria's strategic culture is a major determinant of Syria's external action is illustrated by the following examples: Although Syria could have stayed out of the war in 1948, the then small Syrian army rushed to the frontline in support of its Palestinian brethren in their

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[24] Hanna Batatu, Syria's Peasantry, <u>The Descendents of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics</u>, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 206-207.
[25] Ibid.

conflict with the emerging Jewish state. In 1956, although Egypt alone was the target of the tripartite Israeli/British/French alliance, Syria joined the conflict—out of Arab solidarity—by, among other things, blowing up the British-owned Tapline pipeline that ran from Iraq to Syria's Mediterranean port of Lattakia. During the 1960s, although Israel's attempts to channel water from the Jordan River to the Negev desert did not affect Syria, the Syrian government set out to divert the Jordan River's head waters—fueling tensions between Arabs and Israelis that culminated in the Six Day War.

Impact of Strategic Culture on WMD conceptions, calculations, and policies

As noted above, in 1970 the more moderate faction of the Ba'th, led by Hafez Assad, limited Syria's objective to the containment of Israel to within its 1967 boundaries. Despite Syria's limited objectives vis-à-vis Israel, and given Israel's superior military power, Syria engaged in the development of chemical weapons so as to deter Israel from attacking Syria. From a Syrian perspective, should Israel attack Syria, Damascus would then be in a position to strike Israel's centers of mobilization and inflict unacceptable harm.[26]

According to the Monterey Institute of International Studies' Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) and to other specialized organizations, Syria has a large and advanced chemical weapons capability. That capability is said to include chemical warheads for SCUD ballistic missiles and chemical gravity bombs for delivery by aircraft. Syria's chemical weapons stockpile is in the hundreds of tons. Agents are believed to include Sarin (a nerve agent that can be lethal to victims who inhale it or absorb it through the skin or via eye contact), VX (an even more potent nerve agent), and mustard gas, with major production facilities near the cities of Damascus and Homs.[27]

Syria began developing chemical weapons in the early 1980s as part of Hafez Assad's quest to reach strategic parity with Israel. Assad sought parity with Israel to strengthen his hand in future negotiations over the terms of peace between Israel and the Arabs. For Assad, strategic parity did not necessarily mean matching Israel tank-for-tank and plane-for-plane. To do so in terms of conventional military power was, given Syria's slim resources, beyond Syria's

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[26] See Murhaf Jouejati, "Syrian Motives for its WMD Programs and What to do About Them," *Middle East Journal*, V. 59, N.1, Winter 2005; and ibid., "Syrian WMD Programs in Context," in *Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction In The Middle East*, James A. Russell, ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 63-73.
[27] See http://cns.miis.edu/research/wedme/syria.htm; and "Top US Officials Voice Concern About Syria's WMD Capability," *Arms Control Today*, May 2003, at www.armscontrol.org/act/2003_05/syria_may03.

capability. Indeed, Syria had always been militarily inferior to Israel. During the 1948 Palestine War, Syria could deploy no more than 2,000 poorly armed personnel along the old Palestine border. In June 1967, the Syrian army was decimated by Israel's invading force. In three days of combat, Israel's army seized the entire Golan Heights. It was not until the 1973 October War that Syria could claim some successes against Israel. However, when Egypt, Syria's wartime ally, announced a ceasefire just a few days into the war (enabling in the process Israeli forces to concentrate along the Syrian front), the Syrian army nearly collapsed as Israel's army broke through Syrian defenses, reaching the town of Sa'sa' twenty five miles from Damascus. Although Israel later withdrew from that portion of Syrian territory, Israel's withdrawal was only as a result of the US-brokered 1974 disengagement of forces agreement. In the process, however, the disparity of power between Israel and Syria brought the message home to Assad that, in the absence of a deterrent capability, Israeli forces could easily overrun Damascus. Even as Assad later tried to bolster the conventional offensive and defensive capabilities of Syria's armed forces, the balance of power between the two foes continued to be lopsided: In 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon and its armor routed Syrian forces there. Although the retreat of Syrian ground forces was orderly, the Syrian air force did not fare as well: Syria lost 82 aircraft (for the loss of one Israeli combat aircraft) in one day of dogfights. Seeing that the Syrian air force is no match for the Israeli air force, Assad decided to acquire long range surface-to-surface missiles.[28] It is shortly thereafter that he decided to develop a chemical warfare capability.

Hafez Assad's decision to seek strategic parity with Israel was the stepchild of his earlier attempts to alter the balance of power – all of which failed. Assad's thinking was that the balance of power could be attained if Arab states worked together to force Israel to the negotiating table. The first attempt was, as mentioned above, in 1973 when Syria and Egypt launched a surprise attack against Israel. That attempt failed because Egypt later engaged in separate talks with Israel that led to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. The second attempt was in 1979 when Assad sought to build an eastern Arab front in compensation for the loss of Egypt from the Arab power equation. That attempt also failed: The Arab states that made up the front (Iraq, Jordan, and the Palestine Liberation Organization) were far too divided among themselves to pursue "joint-Arab action."

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[28] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), p. 165.

Despite Assad's efforts to bring Syria's armed forces to par, however, Syria was unable to alter the balance of power. Syria had to abandon its quest for strategic parity with Israel in April 1997 when, during a visit by Assad to Moscow, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev indicated that the Soviet Union would no longer accommodate that quest. Gorbachev warned Assad that efforts to achieve parity would not succeed: Israel would strike preemptively long before Syria attained its goal and, with firm US support, would come out ahead in any arms race.[29] Since the demise of Syria's Soviet patron, the asymmetry in conventional power between Syria and Israel steadily widened as Syria has not been able to systematically upgrade its weapons systems. What is more, Russia, the Soviet successor state, now demands payment in cash before it will supply Syria's armed forces with the spare parts needed to keep Syria's ageing equipment running – cash that Syria's shrinking economy is unable to generate.

In these circumstances, the strategic value of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal has, from a Syrian perspective, multiplied and chemical weapons continue to be the choice weapon with which to deter and contain Israel. This raises the following questions: 1) Will Syria ever use its chemical weapons? 2) Will Damascus transfer chemical weapons to terrorist groups?

There is nothing in the historical record to suggest that Syria might actually use chemical weapons against its foes, Israel included. Unlike Saddam's Iraq, which used chemical weapons against Iraq's Kurdish minority in March 1988 and against Iran at various times during the Iran-Iraq War, Syria never resorted to the use of chemical weapons, either against its internal opponents (the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 in Hama) or its external ones (Israeli forces during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982). Over and above that, there is no indication that Syria might willingly transfer chemical weapons to the militant anti-Israel groups it supports. According to former U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton, "there is currently no information indicating that the Syrian government has transferred WMD to terrorist organizations or would permit such groups to acquire them."[30] In this regard, the record shows that Syria has kept a very tight rein over these groups. This caution is a product of Syria's acute

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[29] Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and the Middle East Peace Process* (New YorK: Council on foreign Relations Press, 1991) p. 165.
[30] John R. Bolton's testimony before the House International Relations Committee, September 16, 2003, "Syria's Weapons of Mass Destruction and Missile Development Programs," in http://www.state.gov/t/us/rm/24135.htm

awareness that it would ultimately pay the price for any major terrorist incident it was believed to be behind, especially against Israel.[31]

CONCLUSION

Relying on Syria's awareness of its military weakness vis-à-vis Israel is not necessarily cause for comfort, however. Syria is determined to recover its Israeli-occupied Golan Heights— by hook or by crook. As Bashar Assad himself put it to a Kuwaiti newspaper recently, "If there is no peace, naturally you should expect that war may come."[32] In other words, if Syria does not recover its Israeli-occupied Golan Heights through negotiations, it will try to do so through war, a prospect that might have horrific consequences for the entire region.

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[31] Syria has not been directly implicated in any terrorist activity since the 1986 "Hindawi affair" (the attempted bombing of an El Al flight from London).

[32] *Al Anba* interview with Syrian President Bashar Assad, Sunday, 8 October, 2006

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