

# Syria's Regional Relationships:

## Past and Present

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### Brief Analysis

**G**eopolitical considerations have determined Syria's regional alliances. The underlying concern for every Syrian leader in making these alliances has been the attainment and the retention of power. No Syrian leader has been more successful at reaching this goal than Hafiz al-Asad. What makes this achievement even more impressive is that he is a member of the Alawite minority, a community much despised by the Sunni-dominated Syrian power base of Damascus.

> Two divisive issues have been crucial in determining Syria's commitment to regional alliances: Arab unity and the Palestinian question. Whereas the Cold War had an impact on Syria's alliances, the country's orientation was only secondarily an outgrowth of the Ba'th Party and its revolutionary ideology. In fact, it was a convergence of interests rather than a one of ideas that pulled Syria and Egypt into the Soviet sphere of influence.

The issue of Arab unity played a central role because of a deep-seated sense of insecurity. Greater Syria was truncated into several states at the end of World War I. Syria's sense of vulnerability was further heightened by the fact that, during the French mandate, the modern state was subdivided into several autonomous regions corresponding to ethnic and religious communities. The most important of Syria's regional alliances since statehood have been those with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These dominated Syrian policy in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Saudi aspect weakened during 1958-1961, when the United Arab Republic joined Syria and Egypt. The alliance with Egypt as well as Saudi Arabia was renewed with the return of the Ba'th Party to power in 1963, pulling Syria back into the fold at a time when it had drifted too far toward the Soviet Union. The Damascus-Cairo-Riyadh axis was instrumental in both the 1967 and 1973 wars. It weakened after Egyptian president Anwar Sadat traveled to Jerusalem in 1977, but it was reinvigorated by the time of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Syria and Iran vs. Iraq: Although the Ba'th Party controls both Syria and Iraq, the party has been polarized between Baghdad and Damascus since the 1960s, and the two countries are in fact bitter opponents. A prime example of this hostility is the fact that Syria sided with Iran -- a non-Arab state -- in its war with Iraq. Syria felt abandoned after the Camp David Accords, and a revolutionary Iran provided an impetus to resist peace overtures coming from Egypt and the United States. Syria was also able to use Iran's influence over Shi'i political and paramilitary groups in Lebanon, whose civil war only raised insecurities in Syria. Finally, Syria's connection with Iran also serves to legitimize the Alawi community's Islamic credentials, which is important for ensuring Alawi political dominance and for Asad's plans to have his son succeed him.

Not very much political significance should be attached to the growing trade relations between Syria and Iraq. The relationship began after the United Nations "oil for food" resolution, when Syria realized that Iraq had considerable resources that Damascus sought to exploit, especially with Syria's own economy in decline. Officials of both countries downplay rumors of serious political talks. The type of relationship that Syria wants to maintain can be seen in the fact that, whereas the Iraqi foreign minister visited Damascus, the Syrians reciprocated by sending a deputy trade minister to Baghdad.

Syria vs. Israel, Turkey, and Jordan: Syria has been the Arab state most ardent in its opposition to peace with Israel. Contrary to popular belief, Asad was never truly on the "brink" of peace. Asad has long demanded better peace terms than either Egypt or Jordan received from Israel, and there is little reason to believe he would accept from Binyamin Netanyahu the same terms he rejected from Yitzhak Rabin or Shimon Peres. Syria wants to appear engaged in the peace process to improve its position in the region -- that is, to maintain the Cairo-Riyadh-Damascus axis. Syria also believes that its engagement in the peace process will be rewarded with international goodwill.

Today Syria is beleaguered, surrounded by hostile countries, and locked in territorial disputes with two of them -- Turkey and Israel. Asad's abiding concern is that both Israel and Turkey, with the connivance of Jordan, are intent on driving his regime back to the negotiating table with Israel. In the recent crisis with Turkey over the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Syria took the position that Turkey and Israel were trying to ensnare it in a situation in which it would have to make even greater concessions than those needed to defuse the border crisis with Turkey. In this respect, Syria has been credited by Arab observers with outmaneuvering Israel and Turkey by not giving them the conflict they "desired." Yet, Syria will also be perceived as weaker as a result of the crisis.

> Syrian antagonism to Jordan can be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s when King 'Abdullah of Jordan was overly active in Syrian politics, seeking the union of Greater Syria under his throne. The entrenched disagreement between the two reappeared over the years in terrorist infiltrations from Syria into Jordan, and previously the Syrians complained of Jordanian support for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Syria seems to resent Jordan's peace treaty with Israel even more than Egypt's treaty, to the point that Syria seems to accept the Egypt-Israel peace while rejecting the peace between Jordan and Israel. In the end, however, Jordan does not feel it has an obligation to take its cues from Syria, and is unlikely to do so in the future.

Lebanon: Syrian insecurities combined with an implacable nationalist mentality led to Syria's intervention in Lebanon as a safeguard for Syria's flank against Israel. This intervention has changed over time, from triumph in 1976 to humiliation in 1982 to the 1990 Tai'f agreement, which recognized Syria's primacy in Lebanon. Throughout these changes, however, the objectives were clear and consistent: Control the events and players in Lebanon, regardless of who they are, so that they would not threaten Syrian security. The underlying aim was for no group to start a war with Israel at a time not of Syria's choosing. That is why warring factions in Lebanon have over time fought either with Syria or against it, but not for it.

Regional Outlook: Syria is not alone in the region. Iran is still a real ally and Syria can still fall back on the Cairo-Damascus-Riyadh axis. Yet, Syria is considerably weaker after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the event of a Syrian war with Turkey and Israel, Egypt is unlikely to do anything more than defuse pressure, and Saudi Arabia cannot really help. Syria can only deal with one crisis at a time, as evidenced by Asad's quick settlement of the crisis over the PKK.

The close relationship between Israel, Jordan, and Turkey is still a very real pressure point for Syria. Yet, it is too premature to speak of an emerging alliance between Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Iraq and Syria, on the one hand, and Iraq and Iran, on the other hand, have been at loggerheads with each other for a long time. Their interests are diverse and divergent. They lack the essential common interest that could serve as glue to bind them together. Their only common cause is a negative one -- their opposition to others. An alliance of this kind would be subject to the vagaries of inter-Arab politics. It could fall apart on a number of regional issues -- the least of them, Syria's resumption of peace talks with Israel, which would aggravate relations with both Iraq and Iran.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Adam Frey.

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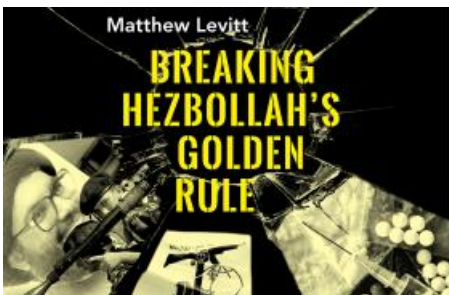
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