

Resisting American Hegemony: the Case of Syria

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"Mr. President, what do you fear most these days?"

"The thought of this armed America that today behaves as a superpower without vision. (Interview with Bashar al-Asad in "La Repubblica (Rome) 28 February 2005)

The US invasion of Iraq precipitated a US-Syrian crisis. On one side, an implacable hegemon seems determined to carry out regime change in a smaller state. Syria's official ideology is Arab nationalism, is widely denounced in certain Washington circles as an evil ideology that must be confronted (as in Iraq). On the other hand, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's defiance of Washington over the Iraq war in the name of this very ideology stands in striking contrast to the appeasement of the US practiced by every other Arab leader. What makes Syria different?

I. Implications for IR

The Syrian-US case provides insight into the emerging world order and has implications for contending IR theories. Firstly, the case throws some light on the behaviour of the hegemon in the "periphery." In traditional hegemonic stability theory, the hegemon operates multilaterally, in accordance with international legitimacy, while providing global public goods--above all stability. Hansen argues that a unipole will likely husband its power, and, less worried than under bipolarity about extending its sphere of influence, would act as an off-shore balancer rather than pushing its particular interests. The hegemon is not, however, acting as theory expects. In the invasion of Iraq and the consequent Syrian-US conflict, it has acted unilaterally and without international legitimacy, has become a party to conflicts and a destabilizing revisionist power in the Middle East vulnerable to "imperial overreach."

The case also has implications for the debate over the post-cold war world order from the point of view of the "South," the small powers of the periphery such as Syria. The case might be seen to validate claims that the world order is coming to resemble less an anarchy of sovereign states and more a hierarchy in which the hegemon and the core states dictate the rules to the periphery; the norm of sovereignty that long shielded weaker states from great powers is becoming conditional and the UN, once a refuge for LDCs, an instrument of hegemony.¹

How would small third world powers behave in such an order? Realists see the LDCs as having lost the leverage and autonomy they possessed in a bipolar world. In the view of Escude, "peripheral realism" dictates that most lesser powers, unwilling to pay the high costs of defying the core, are likely to submit, largely out of economic dependency. Classical realism would also expect weak powers, insofar as they are rational actors, to bandwagon with superior threatening power, at least in the absence of any balancing coalition that they could join. For Hansen, because other powerful states do not balance against the unipole except on a temporary ad-hoc issue basis, small powers lack the option to join a countervailing coalition against a threatening hegemon and because regional rivalries matter most to them, they bandwagon with the unipole in order to enlist it on their side in such conflicts or at least to avoid provoking it into backing their rivals.

How then can we explain the willingness of a small state like Syria to risk overt confrontation with a determined hegemon? Rational behaviour, from a utilitarian/materialist point of view suggests it should have bandwagoned to neutralize US hostility--as every other one of the Arab states did--and get a share of the spoils of the war or obtain side payments-- as Syria itself did in the first Iraq war of 1990s. Steven David's "omnibalancing" rationality suggests third world elites, lacking legitimacy at home, align with a remoter external threat to contain a more immediate domestic opposition, arguably the pathway taken by every other Arab state, all of which defied their own publics to appease the hegemon. Only Syria did the opposite: it defied an external threat in part to sustain internal legitimacy: neo-utilitarian approaches cannot explain why a state would make one choice rather than another and we will need to look at alternative "constructivist" explanations in the Syrian case.

But what counter-leverage, if any, does a small state have vis-a-vis the hegemon and how long could it sustain its defiance? For Hansen, while state elites may, on the basis of unit level attributes (domestic politics), choose to defy the dictates of the systemic power distribution, over the long run, they will either adapt (socialized by the costs of defiance) to this order or they will not survive. On the other hand, some argue that small states can defy more powerful ones if they care more about the issue than their antagonist and are, hence willing to pay the price and run the risks of defiance. Hansen also notes that the hegemon has a weak point, imperial overstretch, which can limit its ability to punish a recalcitrant state.

Finally, the case has some implications for debates over the contemporary world order, notably between realists and liberals/constructivists over the relative importance of international norms as opposed to power and interests in shaping inter-state relations. The Syrian-American struggle is framed by the actors in terms of a struggle over international legitimacy and norms: the imperatives of war against terrorism and the "axis of evil" collides with those of sovereignty and Arab nationalism. But realists, such as Morgenthau who see ideologies as the rationalisations of power would look for the conflicts of interest underlying these ideological struggles.

SYRIA AND THE US

The decline in US--Syrian relations can be attributed to five factors: 1) the collapse of the Arab-Israeli (and Syrian-Israeli) peace process; 2) the rise of the neo-cons in Washington; 3) the September 11 events; 4) Syrian alignment with Iraq, and 5) Syrian resistance to the US war on Iraq--which put relations seemingly beyond repair, with Washington subsequently coming to seek not a change in Syrian behaviour but a change in regime.

Syria's pre-Iraq war foreign policy tangent and the US

Syria's state formation, particularly the dismemberment of historic Syria and the Zionist colonization of Palestine, generated a powerful sense of Arab identity and irredentism in Syria and put the country on an Arab nationalist foreign policy tangent that endured through countless leadership changes. The loss of the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 war further locked Syria into a struggle with Israel to recover this territory, first in the 1973 war and when this failed in a proxy war in Lebanon chiefly meant to strengthen Syria's hand in a negotiated recovery of the lost territory.

In this struggle, the US has been perceived as the main backer of Syria's Israeli antagonist, yet also the one state that could restrain Israel and, if it

thought it in its interest, conceivably broker an Syrian-Israeli settlement in which Syria would recover the Golan. As such, Damascus traditionally sought to convince Washington that its presumed interest in Middle East stability would be served by such a settlement by demonstrating to Washington that if Syria's interests in such a settlement were accommodated it could be a factor for regional stability congruent with US interests; conversely, if they were ignored Syria would obstruct US initiatives. Thus, Hafiz foiled several attempts of the US to engineer separate peace treaties between Israel and Lebanon and Jordan that excluded Syria. The latter risky option required Syria seek shelter in various alliances--Arab, Iranian, and in Soviet protection, reinforced by a modest non-conventional "deterrent capability" which maintained stability on the Syrian-Israeli border² --in a word, a certain "balancing" against US and Israeli power.

However, as the end of the Cold War removed the option to balance between the superpowers, Syria began to "bandwagon" with the US hegemon, partly in order to balance the greater threat from Israel: specifically, it joined the 1990 anti-Iraq coalition and thereafter the Madrid peace process in the expectation that, in return for Arab support in the Gulf war, the US would broker an acceptable settlement of Arab-Israeli conflict that would enable Syria to recover the Golan in return for peace with Israel.³ Syria made a "strategic decision" for peace, entered direct negotiations with Israel for the first time, and made several concessions to Israel over demilitarised zones and normalisation of relations;⁴ at the same time, however, it used Hizbollah to keep military pressure on Israel in southern Lebanon, conveying the message that Israel could not have peaceful borders while occupying Arab (southern Lebanon but also the Golan) territory.

Simultaneously, the stagnation of Syria's state-dominated economy, as oil prices and foreign aid to Syria declined from the late eighties, undermined the economic base of the regime, and was seen to require an influx of (chiefly Arab and expatriate) investment which the regime sought through incremental economic liberalisation. No such economic revival would be forthcoming without a peace settlement that would give investors confidence and allow the dismantling of the national security state to which the economy was subordinated. In anticipation of a peace settlement, Syria was gearing up for major economic reform in the late 1990s. But it must be stressed that, by contrast to other Arab states, Syria, with oil, food self-sufficiency, no dependence on foreign investment and no significant debt to the West, had, up to this time, retained its economic sovereignty and Hafiz al-Asad had consistently subordinated economic to geopolitical imperatives in his foreign policy.

It was widely expected that the convergence of opportunities and pressures peaking in the late nineties, might make the leadership change at the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in 2000, the watershed that released pent-up pressures for radical change in Syria. Bashar al-Asad was seen as representative of a new generation with a vision of "modernisation" which entailed deepened economic liberalisation, a reduction of rent-seeking corruption, and an gradual integration of Syria into the world market. Indeed, the centrepiece of Bashar's foreign policy was initially a strategic opening to Europe; his first visits abroad were to Western European capitals, not Syria's old East-bloc allies, and he made the strategic decision to bring Syria into the Euro-Med partnership, an agreement that would require and drive Syrian movement toward a market economy. Bashar had to share power in the regime

with his fathers lieutenants, the so-called "old guard" many of which remained wedded to Hafiz's Arab-nationalist foreign policy commitments and the struggle with Israel over the Golan, but which, depending on their calculus of costs and benefits, were not systematically opposed to his new policy of economic liberalisation within and Westward rapprochement without.

Unfortunately, the external environment for Syrian reform was dramatically soured by the failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace process (symbolised by the failure of the Clinton-Asad summit of March 2000), the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifadah and the rise of the hard-line Sharon government in Israel. With a peace settlement off the agenda and with it the prospect that economic liberalisation might rescue the economy, Bashar's regime opted to pursue an opening to Iraq, which, under Saddam Hussein, had hitherto been a bitter rival but which was now seeking Syrian co-operation in evading UN sanctions. The Iraqi relation was primarily a matter of geo-economics, meant to secure the resources to stabilise the economy in the short term. Its centerpiece was the reopening at the end of 2000 of the oil pipeline from Iraq to Syria's Mediterranean port of Baniyas that had been closed during the Iran-Iraq war. Damascus was said to receive about 200,000 bpd of Basra Light crude from Iraq at below market prices (thought to be around \$10-15 per barrel), enabling it to then export an equivalent amount of Syrian Light crude at much higher international prices. The pipeline produced perhaps \$1 billion/year in revenue for the government, about 5 percent of Syria's gross domestic product. In addition, Syrian business coveted the prospects of monopolies over the Iraqi market and sought to establish a foothold there at a time when an end to the Iraq sanctions regime seemed on the horizon. This was a decisive factor in starting Syria on a collision course with the United States.

US Policy in the Middle East and the Decline of US-Syrian Relations

US policy in the Middle East historically balanced two potentially contradictory interests, securing access to oil at "reasonable prices" through alliances with Arab clients (above all swing producer Saudi Arabia) and support for Israel--which antagonized the Arab world.⁵ Washington attempted to resolve the contradictions in its policy through the pursuit of an Arab-Israeli peace process entailing a compromise in which Israel would evacuate the occupied territories in return for a peace treaties and normalization of relations with the Arab states. The US was, however, handicapped in brokering the peace process by the ever-rising influence of the Zionist lobby which led Washington to acquiescence in (and provide funding which made possible) Israel's continued illegal colonisation (in violation of the Geneva convention) of the very occupied territories that had to be the basis of a compromise peace settlement.

As long as the US sought to secure its interests through brokering of the peace process, Syria was seen as a pivotal state that should be engaged. Except under Reagan, US administrations since Nixon accepted the conventional wisdom propounded by Kissinger that the Arabs could not make war without Egypt (whose neutralization he secured) and could not make peace without Syria. A Syrian-Israeli peace was seen as decisively bolstering the forces of moderation in the region while completing the "circle of peace" around Israel. Outstanding issues of contention between the US and Syria (terrorism, WMDs) were thought to be resolvable within the framework of a Syrian-Israeli settlement since they were all "cards"

Syria sought to play in the on-going struggle over the terms of the settlement.⁶ In the nineties Syria, as came very close to reaching a settlement with Israel brokered by Washington's intensive third party mediation, US-Syrian relations were excellent. However, the peace process ultimately collapsed and even though this was largely owing to the unwillingness of Israel PM Barak's to follow through on Israeli commitments to total withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and of Clinton to hold him to them,⁷ the collapse was blamed on Syria and interrupted the US-Syrian engagement that had paralleled the peace process. Once Bush and the neo-cons came to power, the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict ceased to be a priority and Syria ceased to be seen as a US partner in the peace process and instead as a threat to Israel.

Another factor that led to the souring of relations was that even as the new Bush administration sought to isolate Iraq (preparing the ground for possible regime change even before 9/11), Syria's deepened ties with Baghdad and receipt of Iraqi oil outside the UN oil-for-food regime became a bone of contention, even though the US had approved similar arrangements for its Turkish and Jordanian allies. US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus and mistakenly believed that he had obtained Bashar's agreement to put the proceeds from Iraqi oil in UN escrow accounts; when this did not happen Powell professed to find Bashar untrustworthy.⁸ The Syrians also made co-operation with Washington's proposed "smart sanctions" against Iraq contingent on "firm positions regarding the Israeli aggression against the Arabs." Syria did not want to defy the US, which it needed to contain and deal with Israel, and it was risky to be seen outside "international legitimacy" (the Iraq sanctions regime). But Syria hoped to make the price of co-operation in keeping Iraq isolated, at the expense of its own economic interests in Iraqi ties, significant.⁹ Moreover, it appears Syria saw Iraq as yet another "card" with which it could try to re-engage the US in brokering a settlement with Israel.

Decisive in the decline of US-Syrian relations was the rise to power in the Bush government of the so-called "neo-cons" and their hawkish patrons (Cheney and Rumsfeld) who advocated a sharp departure from traditional US policy toward the Arabs, including Syria. The neo-cons, intimately tied to Israel's rightwing Likud party, supported Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policy of colonization in the occupied territories in pursuit of "Greater Israel"; since this obstructed a peace settlement and endangered the Arab relations on which oil access depended (particularly with Saudi Arabia), they began proposing to cut through this conundrum by the use of America's overwhelming military capability to "change the dynamics of the Middle East." They hit on the idea that the seizure of Iraq's pivotal oil fields would make appeasement of the Arabs (and the Saudi connection) superfluous; moreover, from this Iraqi base, the US could intimidate remaining resistance--from Syria and Iran--to imposition of a pro-Israeli Pax-Americana in the region. Syria, as an obstacle to this plan, was in the neo-con crosshairs even before they came to power: neo-cons such as Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, and David Wurmser had previously advised Israeli PM on Netanyahu to use force against Syria and once in power they would lobby for the use of American power against Damascus.¹⁰

The events of 11 September gave the "neo-cons" a unique opportunity to paint Israel's foes as America's foes. They used the involvement of Saudis in 9/11 to depict the kingdom as an unreliable ally, even an enemy. They painted a stark new world in which all states that were not in total agreement with the

US on issues having to do with "terrorism" were foes. States that were not totally with America were said to be against it and Syria tried to take a middle ground. Consistent with its "war on terrorism", the US now became insistent that the Damascus press offices of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, responsible for suicide bombings in Israel, be closed. Syria, which regarded the groups as "cards" in the struggle with Israel and from which it derived some nationalist legitimacy in a period of murderous Israeli repression in the occupied territories, resisted. Syria supported the US war on al-Qaida, but objected to Washington's tendency to conflate what Syria took to be movements of national resistance to Israeli occupation, notably Hizbollah, with terrorism. Bashar told US officials that America's war in Afghanistan was simply revenge and that an effective war on terrorism meant dealing with the injustice that breeds it, most notably the Israeli occupation of Arab land.

Syria's unwillingness to fall in with American demands on terrorism coincided with the new doctrine in Washington that any state that was believed to support "terrorism" and to have WMDs was an immediate threat to the US itself against which Washington was entitled to wage preventive war. Syria could be construed to fall into this category and neo-cons David Wurmser, in the office the Vice President and John Bolton in the State Department, made concerted efforts to paint Syria as a threat comparable to Iraq. While US moderates in the State Department and CIA were sceptical about aggressively confronting a state which was actually proving a useful ally in the "war on terrorism," (by providing intelligence that helped thwart attacks on Americans) the neo-cons seemed determined to destroy common ground between Syria and the US, isolate Damascus diplomatically, and deploy economic sanctions and military threats to bring down the regime.¹¹ This faction would get the upper hand over resistance by the official moderates for a number of reasons.

The US determination to invade Iraq was the immediate catalyst of the crisis in US-Syrian relations. At the UN and in the Arab League, Syrian diplomacy attempted to build a coalition to block or at least withhold legitimation from a US invasion. Yet Syria, keen not to be isolated from "international legitimacy" voted for UNSC 1441, mandating the renewal of United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq, in the hope this might deprive the neo-cons of their excuse for war. On the eve of war, Syrian foreign minister, Farouk al-Sharaa told parliament that the US was going to war in defiance of international law and the UN and that Syria had a national interest in the defeat of the invaders. Syria's Grand Mufti, Ahmad Kaftaru, urged Muslims throughout the world "to use all means and martyrdom operations to defeat the American, British, and Zionist aggression on Iraq." Some half a million Syrians protested the impending invasion in Damascus.¹² Bashar, in a famous interview with *al-Safir*, observed: "No doubt the U.S. is a super-power capable of conquering a relatively small country, but...the U.S. and Britain are incapable of controlling all of Iraq."¹³ This was widely interpreted in Washington to put Syria on the wrong side of the "with us or against us" dictum laid down by the Bush regime.

Syria did little to actually oppose the US invasion and to the extent it did, acted covertly, half-heartedly, and quickly backed away under US threats. Syria allegedly facilitated pre-invasion sales of arms to Iraq which, although meant for Iraqi self-defense, was considered to be illegitimate in Washington. Expecting that Iraqis would defend the regime for months, Syria allowed the movement of volunteers (officially discouraging it, yet, tacitly giving it the

green light or even facilitating it) to Iraq to join the resistance. The regime was unwilling to stand against the tide of anti-American fury that swept Syria and though the thousands of volunteers came from all over the Arab world, many were from northern Syria with its close ties to Iraq, concentration of Muslim militants and border tribes that were extensions of those fighting the occupation in Iraq.¹⁴ Once the Saddamist regime fell, Syria also gave refuge to some Iraqi officials fleeing Iraq.

As the neo-cons' star rose amidst Washington's initial military successes in Iraq, they seemed on the verge of using Syria's hostility to this venture to get support for a military attack on Syria. Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Feith launched a campaign of accusations against Syria. The US bombed the Syrian trade centre in Baghdad and shut down the revenue-earning Iraqi oil pipeline to Syria. Bush, asked whether US forces would invade Syria, answered that "Each situation will require a different response, first things first; we expect co-operation from Syria."¹⁵ Under US threat, Syria closed its four official border posts with Iraq on 5 April 2003 and expelled some former Iraqi officials to Iraq where they were captured. Syria was however, initially unwilling to either deploy troops to police its 500 mile border or to dissipate its legitimacy through repression of the centres of resistance in the north of Syria. However, US sources acknowledged that, although the Syrians "were not going out of their way to stop" the movement of fighters into Iraq, the flow soon slowed to a trickle.¹⁶

Why did Syria give the neo-cons the opportunity to depict it as a foe of the US by its stand on behalf of a regime that was clearly doomed and had a long history of animosity toward Syria? Pundits tend to blame the decision on Bashar's inexperience which they contrast with his father's wily adherence to America's anti-Iraq coalition in 1991. In fact, Bashar, given his commitment to an economic reform program contingent on integration into the world capitalist market, had a greater incentive to bandwagon than Hafiz in 1990 and had the circumstances been similar he probably would have done so. But in 2003 they were entirely different: if in 1990 Hafiz was given incentives to bandwagon (e.g. a free hand in Lebanon, promise of a vigorous US peace effort), in 2003 the US invasion threatened the economic stake Syria had in Iraq and, while it is hard to know whether Syria would have struck a deal with Washington that would have secured these interests (Colin Powell hinted at a Syrian share in the reconstruction of Iraq), the neo-cons were only offering threats. More important, if in 1991, Saddam was the aggressor against another Arab state, in this instance an Arab state was the victim of aggression by a foreign state, support for which would have been an egregious affront to the Arab nationalist values so ingrained in Syrian thinking. Clearly the regime was pulled in opposing directions: the public outrage at the US invasion --from which the policy process had been insulated under Hafiz's *realpolitik*--now welled up through the fissures in Bashar's regime and made its legitimacy incompatible with submission to American dictates even though the regime's survival seemed to require some accommodation with Washington. Moreover, the US doctrine of pre-emption, concretised in the invasion of Iraq, in threatening to overturn the very rules of world order and create a jungle where the strong would rule, and pursued in close alliance with Israel, seemed to threaten the Syrian regime's very survival unless it virtually abandoned its Arab nationalist identity and role. Bashar may therefore have calculated that if the US were to encounter significant resistance in Iraq it would be unable to

target Syria and would, on the contrary, have to reach a deal with Damascus to stabilise Iraq.

Sandwiched, in the wake of the conquest of Iraq, between Israeli military power in the West and the Americans to the East, the Syrian regime's very survival required it play its few remaining cards with the utmost skill. US Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Damascus with a list of demands on Syria--to expel militant Palestinian factions, dismantle Hizbollah, withdraw from Lebanon, and co-operate with the occupation regime in Iraq. These demands struck at Syria's most vital interests--its cards in the struggle over the Golan, its sphere of influence in the Levant, its Arab nationalist stature in the Arab world. No Syrian government could accede to them except under the direst and most imminent threat. Moreover, American demands were presented in a triumphalist style certain to inflame resistance: Powell told the US press that "there are no illusions in...[Bashar's]mind as to what we are looking for from Syria." A State Department remark ahead of the visit that "We're not coming bringing any carrots" brought foreign ministry spokesperson, Bouthiana Shaaban, to respond that Syria was willing to contribute to regional solutions but could not bear to be dictated to by the US. Co-operation required "real engagement on a parity of dignity."¹⁷ Strindberg reports that diplomats in Damascus believed the US approach stemmed from a desire to humiliate Syria for its opposition to the war.¹⁸

Issues in the Post-war US-Syrian Conflict

The Conflict over Iraq

Despite US demands, Syria initially refused to accept the legitimacy of the occupation regime, although under various pressures it has, over time partially conceded on this point and, had the US been willing to reach an arrangement, Syria might have been brought fully in line with US effort to stabilise Iraq.

Bashar initially affirmed that Syria had to support the people of Iraq against the US plan to efface its Arab and Muslim character but added: "I do not mean we should support the resistance with weapons. I want to make this point clear so that it will not be misunderstood."¹⁹ Yet soon after the war ended, Syria reached an agreement with US generals in Iraq to provide electricity to northern Iraq in return for allowing Syrian businessmen to re-establish trade with Iraq. Not wanting to be isolated from its Security Council allies at a time when it was under immediate American threat, Syria also reluctantly adhered after the fact to UNSC resolution 1483 which in effect legitimised the occupiers' control of Iraq's oil money. However, Syria refused to recognize the US-installed Iraq Governing Council, and campaigned in vain to prevent other Arab states from doing so; there were conflicts with it and the US over Iraqi assets that had been transferred to Syrian banks before the war, with Syria insisting it would only return Iraqi assets to a legitimate government;²⁰ as a result of this, the US would cite the Commercial Bank of Syria as a "primary money-laundering concern," attempting to cut it off from international financial transactions. Yet Syria voted for UN Resolution 1511 in October 2003 that affirmed the Governing Council to embody the sovereignty of Iraq in the transition until internationally recognised representative government was established and which called on neighbouring states to prevent the transit of "terrorists" to Iraq;²¹ at the same time, though, Syria openly received delegates of Sunni groups overtly opposed to the occupation.

By the end of 2003, as debate raged in Iraq over the transition to self rule, Syria supported those, notably the Shia, demanding elections against the US attempt to manipulate representation to an Iraqi constituent assembly. Syria, Bashar affirmed, would recognize Iraq when elected and autonomous, not imposed, institutions were in place.²² Yet, keen to get the Iraq government to acknowledge that it needed Syrian co-operation to stabilise Iraq, and desiring re-open the Kirkuk-Banyas oil pipeline closed by Washington, it later received interim PM Iyad Allawi and signed a border security agreement with him: Syria's information minister declared that the more the Iraq government liberated itself from American control, the more Syria would cooperate with it (**Daily Star, July 26, 2004** ALHAYAT JULY 7, 2004 , Reem Allaf in World Today. In May 2005, Syria announced diplomatic ties would be restored with Iraq after a twenty-five year abeyance, although the Iraqi government remained dependent on occupying forces.

While this ambivalence could reflect incoherence and factionalism in the Syrian leadership, it more likely reflects the contrary impulses buffeting the regime. It is caught between its reluctance to acknowledge the principle of regime change and occupation on the one hand and, on the other hand, its need not to be outside UN legitimacy, its desire to salvage some of its interests in Iraq, and its wish to use American predicament in Iraq to extract concessions on US-Syrian relations. It is also torn between its revulsion at dealing with what it sees as collaborators working with the Americans and its interest in rebuilding relations with Iraq's rulers, most of whom--the Kurds, Shia and anti-Saddam Ba'thists-- it had supported in the Saddam era; alienating them risks the real potential that Syrian influence in Iraq could (together with its ally, Iran) counter that of the US.

At the same time, US charges that Syria was facilitating the insurgency remained a continuous thread of contention and occasional engagement with Washington. The neo-cons, put on the defensive by the failure to find non-conventional weapons in Iraq and by the growing resistance to the occupation, sought to divert attention from these failures by blaming Syria. Empirically, we cannot ascertain the extent of Syria's role, with or without its government's connivance, in fuelling the resistance in Iraq. Reportedly 200 Syrian insurgents have been captured in two years of occupation but such foreign fighters make up no more than 3-5% of the total insurgency.

In order to undermine the neo-con drive against it, Syria security has cracked down on the centres of Islamic militancy in Aleppo (confiscating passports, detentions); has not only taken its own measures to close the border (more troops, berms) but has tried to get the US border commanders actively and openly working with Syrian officers on border management and has requested, in vain, that the US provide appropriate surveillance technology. The US military welcomed this stance but it squelched by their Pentagon bosses; thus, in Dec. 2004 at a time when the US military reported new Syrian checkpoints and arrests of jihadis, Rumsfeld's response was to accuse Syrian meddling in Iraq of "killing Americans." (140). Bashar's orders to secure the border have perhaps only been partially implemented by rival security arms which, for bribes or out of animosity toward the US occupation, may look the other way regarding jihadi activity; there is some evidence, too, that the centre's once tight control over localities has weakened, providing some space for insurgents to operate on Syrian soil.

As Syria's borders controls tightened during 2004 and it became obvious that there was no large scale movement across it, and indeed, that infiltration

via other countries was at least as significant, (Daily Star Tuesday, March 09, 2004), Washington began to claim that, nevertheless, most of the suicide bombers came from Syria and that militant cells inside Iraq drew on "unlimited money" from an underground financial network run by former Baath Party leaders and relatives of Saddam Hussein, many of whom the US had identified as operating from Syria. In February 2005, a half-brother of Saddam Hussein, was handed over to the Iraqi authorities and Syria deported to Tunisia and Morocco groups of their nationals involved in smuggling insurgents (OxBus 7 July 05). A telling episode was the US claim that al-Qaida insurgent leader, Zargawi had travelled to Syria in April 2004 to meet insurgents based there. Later some US officials covertly let it be known the claims were bogus, based on a single source considered unreliable by intelligence officials but which had been quickly seized upon by the neo-cons (SyriaComment.com Friday, June 03, 2005).

Underlining the unrelenting US demands on Syria is, in part, the fact that it can only avoid "imperial overreach" if it gets others to bear part of the burdens of policing the chaos in Iraq, partly originating in its own dissolution of the Iraqi army and ultimately the responsibility of the occupier, The US seeks to avoid the investment in money and manpower to secure the border by forcing Syria to undertake this task. What distinguishes the US moderates from the hard-liners is that the former would give Syria some incentives to do this while the later prefer to use threats and coercion, or even to use the issue to demonize the country in preparation for regime change.

WMDs

Another issue bedevilling Syria--US relations, the so-called problem of WMDs, exposes the tactics of the neo-cons, as well as their divergence from the moderates. The neo-con focus on the issue suggests an attempt, not merely to contest specific Syrian policies but to threaten Syria's most vital security interests and indeed to manufacture a Syrian-American crisis. Although Syria's chemically armed missile force is a purely defensive deterrent crucial to its security against a vastly superior nuclear-armed Israeli military; and although, far from posing a threat to anyone, it is a key factor in the balance of power that has maintained two decades of peace on the Syrian-Israel border,²³ the neo-cons, led by John Bolton, repeatedly tried to paint Syrian capabilities as a threat to stability in the Middle East and to the US itself and even accused Syria of harbouring nuclear ambitions. The CIA issued a 35-page rebuttal and Mohammed Baradei, head of the IAEA, declared that there was "no evidence for nuclear activity in Syria," (International Herald Tribune, July 19, 2003 p3) Syria's response exposed the double standards at work: it proposed turning the Middle East into a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction under UN supervision. Washington, however, was not interested since, obviously this would put Israeli capabilities on the table; the neo-con aim, from a Syrian perspective, was to force a unilateral disarmament on Syria, leaving it wholly open to Israeli power and vulnerable to an Israeli dictated peace settlement.

Israel and Terrorism:

Underlying neo-con hostility to Syria was ultimately its obstruction of to Israeli ambitions. It allowed the offices of Hamas and Islamic Jihad on Syrian territory the grounds that these were not operational headquarters and that the radical Palestinian groups represented Palestinian Diaspora opinion with a legitimate right to be heard.²⁴ Syria seemed willing to incur considerable US

hostility to sustain this Arab nationalist stance in opposition to Israel efforts to crush the intifadah and incorporate the West bank, yet also began to make concessions.

Syria soon gave in and closed the militant factions' offices but evidently the leaders remained in Syria for the factions are deeply entrenched in the refugee camps of Syria and Lebanon. Syria also appeased the US by refraining from opposition to the so-called "road map" to Middle East peace, even though it was excluded at Israeli's behest, and by putting Hizbollah under heavy pressure to refrain from challenging Israel in southern Lebanon. In fact, Hizbollah challenges to Israel in disputed Israeli enclaves in the south of Lebanon almost ended.

Nevertheless, Syria could not or would not stop either the suicide bombings that were provoked by Israeli repression and settlement activities in the occupied territories. or Hizbollah's indirect support for the Palestinian intifadah. Israel, in a major escalation, began experimenting with actual military attacks, first on Syria positions in Lebanon, then with an airraid on an inactive Palestinian training camp outside Damascus in October 2003, which broke the traditional rules on engagement, and then in assassinating a Hamas leader in Damascus in September 2004. While most objective parties argued that *both* Israel and its opponents bore responsibility to de-escalate the violence in Palestine and while the US would have once tried to dampen the risks of this kind of escalation, the US had now totally abandoned the role of an "offshore balancer" and become an open partisan on Israel's side. Bush notoriously pre-judged the shape of (and probably thereby obstructed) a final settlement with in Palestine by declaring that Israel was entitled to keep parts of the occupied territories. Bush's position on the October 2003 Israel air-raid was to announce that Israel "must not feel constrained defending the homeland" against terror and to block Syria's efforts to get UNSC condemnation of the attack.²⁵

Coping with Washington: Syria's Strategy in Dealing with the US.

Even in the aftermath of the US conquest of Iraq, analysts close to the regime seemed to believe that Syria could steer a middle way between unrealistic defiance of US power and surrender to its dictates. They argued that Israel was still Syria's real enemy, that US and Israeli interests were not objectively identical and that therefore, a deal with the US was still possible, at least if the power balance should shift to the moderates in Washington. Hence Syria would co-operate with the US where they shared interests, but would refuse US demands that damaged Syrian interests.

The regime apparently believed the balance of power allowed Syria to avoid total submission to US demands for several reasons. First, Syrian analysts believed the US could not as readily resort to military force against Syria as it did against Iraq because Syria did not violate international legitimacy, was not subject to international sanctions, and, far from isolated, has diverse alliances at the regional and international levels. Syria had little oil wealth to fund a US occupation and no opposition prepared to collaborate with it. Washington's difficulties in Iraq, it was hoped, would bring it to the realisation that its military power did not nullify its need for co-operation from regional states that had to be based on mutual respect and sovereignty.

Secondly, in their view, Syria had enough "cards" to make its co-operation important to Washington. Thus, the prevention of terrorism required

a stable regional order and a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and this could not be achieved except through US co-operation with stable, nationally legitimate regimes such as Syria's. Syria's pacification of Lebanon, once a source of regional instability and terrorism, its unique ability to restrain Hizbollah with its proven ability to hurt Israel, its centrality to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement and its readiness for peace with Israel, its secular multi-communal model of governance, its successful elimination of violent Islamic fundamentalism at home and its intelligence co-operation against terrorism--all should make it a natural partner of a US administration that wanted regional stability.

There were, however, serious problems or dilemmas involved with this strategy. One was the fact that the neo-cons, having little interest in regional stability or a peace settlement, saw no advantage in co-operating with Syria. succeeded in making it official US policy not to offer inducements to "rogue states" to change their behaviour. According to Flynt Leverett, a former high US official, this meant that the only US policy option was simply to increase pressure, threats and sanctions against Syria.

Given this, Syria's main protection from US attack and leverage over Washington derived from America's difficulties in pacifying Iraq. Yet while these drove US pragmatists, including the generals in Iraq, to favour co-operation with Syria, the neo-cons and hard-liners in the Defence department obstructed it. This meant that Syria had a certain interest in facilitating the escalation of the insurgency which, however, if pursued, was bound to exacerbate relations with the US.

Even if Syria did not wholly abandon this option (a certain "stick"), it soon embarked on a policy of making incremental concessions to Washington (carrots). Bashar may have received the impression from US officials that co-operation would bring rewards and some of his advisors wanted to offer significant concessions. What constrained the pursuit of this option was that when Syria made concessions, they were followed by increased pressure rather than putting US relations on a better footing. Syria's problem was that only concessions seemed able to blunt US hostility but concessions made under threat only strengthened US hard-liners and conveyed the impression that threats work and that the US need not provide any carrots. William J. Burns, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs opined that "Syria harbours the illusion that cosmetic steps will be enough to defuse our concerns. .. from a misplaced belief that U.S. engagement in Iraq and with the Israelis and Palestinians will prevent us from pursuing a robust agenda with Syria." Burns acknowledged that Syrian co-operation against al-Qaida had saved American lives but this was not sufficient to outweigh Damascus continued support for other "terror groups"--i.e. those contesting Israel's hold over occupied Palestinian territories.²⁶

Despite a general strategic consensus on how to deal with the US, the Syrian regime appeared to at times split over tactics or interpretations of the situation and, hence to act incoherently. Bashar and his liberal advisors were keener to reach accommodation with the US, banking on the "rational" wing of the US administration. What obstructed US-Syrian co-operation, in Bashar's view, was the unbalanced ideological policy followed by the US that, through its unqualified support for Israel and its invasion of Iraq, actually inflamed terrorism, and hence was at odds with its own national security. He went on to distinguish between the irrational wing of the US administration, the neo-cons who recklessly endangered US national interests on behalf of Israel and the

rational elements, embodied by Secretary of State Colin Powell who could recognise the US interest in dealing with Syria. "The only problem between us and the United States is the Israel issue," he insisted.²⁷ Others within the Syrian regime, notably Foreign Minister al-Sharaa, were pessimistic that any arrangement could be reached with a regime so dominated by the neo-cons, without sacrificing Syria's interests and principles. The most overt case of intra-regime conflict was the vote over UN resolution 1483 from which the Syrian delegate absented himself, having received contradictory instructions to vote for it from the president and to vote against from the vice-president and foreign minister.

Unable to mollify Washington, Damascus also pursued a diplomacy of diversifying ties in order avoid the international isolation that had allowed the US to target Iraq. Syria and Turkey, sharing an interest in containing Kurdish "separatism" in Iraq, increasingly aligned. Bashar also pursued alignment with Europe as crucial to Syria's economic re-generation but also to provide a political shield against US hostility. While some European states sided with the US invasion of Iraq, they did not follow Washington in its hostility toward Syria; for example, even pro-US Spain condemned the 2003 Israel air strike on Syria, exchanged state visits with Damascus and made it clear that it did not view Syria in the same light as pre-war Iraq.²⁸ The capstone of Syria's European policy, adherence to the Euro-Med agreement, has however been obstructed or delayed by European states acting on behalf of Washington's agenda. The European Commission and Syria initialed the agreement at the end of 2003, but certain European governments seems to want to make it conditional on Syria's adherence to the Chemical Weapons Convention--a virtual unilateral disarmament that Damascus could not accept. A compromise agreement on the wording of the clause was apparently reached, but the agreement was then again made conditional on Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. These developments signalled greater success on Washington's part in driving a wedge between Syria and Europe. Subsequently, Syria has worked to build denser economic and strategic ties with Russia, China and Asia. Russian and Chinese oil firms have increased there presence in Syria and there has been a significant shift in Syrian trade toward Asia and away from Europe.

The Syrian-US Duel in the War's Aftermath.

A look at the *evolution* of the US-Syrian conflict illuminates how Syria, under intense pressure and perhaps divided, has seemingly pursued contradictory or zigzagging policies, and has, over the long-term, incrementally conceded many US demands, but that, despite this, US pressure has actually tended to *escalate*.

Military Threats

In the wake of the Iraq war, when the US seemed on the verge of targeting Syria, Damascus made several concessions, including closing the border with Iraq and the press offices of the Palestinian factions. Temporarily, Washington reduced its anti-Syrian rhetoric, with Bush stating that Syria had got the message that it needed to cooperate. By the summer of 2003, however, Washington was claiming that Syria had not complied with its demands and levels of tension were described as reaching a "Syrian-American crisis; in June, US forces clashed with and captured Syrian troops in a raid against supposed insurgents that penetrated well inside the Syrian border.²⁹ The October 2003 an

Israeli airraid on the Palestinian camp was widely seen as part of an American strategy to ratchet up the pressure on Syria.

Economic Sanctions

In November 2003, Bush approved the so-called Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA) which imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions on Syria until it complies with all US demands. The act was sponsored by Zionist congressman Eliot Engel of New York and backed by a coalition of Zionist, Maronite Christian and the Christian Right pressure groups. Bush had initially resisted the bill before the Iraq war on the grounds that the US wanted Syrian co-operation in the war on terrorism but Syria's opposition to the war and, specifically, charges that figures in Bashar's inner circle had sent weapons to Saddam before the war were decisive in shifting Bush.³⁰ The act bans the US export of dual use items to Syria (and attempts to prohibit neighbouring countries from doing so as well) and may thus make it hard to get US high technology equipment for Syria's telecommunications and oil industries. It also gives Bush the option to apply several other sanctions, most of which, given the paucity of US-Syrian economic relations, would have little effect on Syria's economy but which would sever the already fragile remaining ties between Syria and the US, such as breaking diplomatic relations and airline ties. The exceptions that could harm the economy are the accompanying US designation of the Syrian commercial Bank as a money-laundering which has severed banking relations and the provision allowing Bush to require US oil companies to withdraw from Syria, which has not, however, been applied. However, the export ban functions as a de facto restriction on US investment in Syria and may be designed to ease American businesses out of Syria gradually.

Initially Syrian analysts tended to dismiss the act as an appeasement of domestic pressure groups and were unconvinced that Bush would force US oil companies to eschew profitable deals. Syria granted US companies concessions designed to increase their stake in Syria in the hope that they could counterbalance the neo-cons in the US policy process. Some believe that Syria's choice of an American consortium over a French one was a factor in Chirac's subsequent alignment with Washington against Syria's presence in Lebanon. Subsequently two US oil firms have withdrawn from Syria. At the same time, Syria had been assiduous in giving concessions to oil companies from other countries that would reduce its dependence on those from any one Western state.

The sanctions, which target Syria as a whole rather than the regime, are most damaging to the emerging private sector. All Syrians from the business community to democracy activists were antagonised by them; for example, well aware that money is laundered in neighbouring countries, none gave any credence to the US claims against that the cumbersome and bureaucratic commercial bank of Syria was money-laundering. Sanctions will only be effective if the US can get other countries to join it in isolating Syria, which it has so far failed to do; indeed, the European Commission stated that "The policy of imposing sanctions on Syria is not useful," Syria's neighbours, Turkey and the Arab League states, also criticised the sanctions. The act may, as Stephen Zunes put it, be "so filled with hyperbole and double-standards that it undermines its own credibility,"³¹ and the Syrian economy is largely invulnerable to their short-term impact, but the act institutionalizes the US-Syrian conflict and will likely prove very hard to reverse.³²

Unrequited Concessions

Aware that much of the animosity to Syria was propelled by the neo-con's Likud connection, Bashar tried to disarm them at the end of 2003 by proposing to restart the peace negotiations with Israel at the point where the two had reached agreement under Rabin; he went further and even hinted that he was willing to negotiate without any preconditions whatsoever. Sharon, however, had no interest in this offer and the neo-cons believed peace and the Golan would be gifts to which Syria was unentitled. At the same time, Syria started making more concessions on Iraq (relations with the regime, border controls).

Syria professed to be receiving mixed signals from Washington that confused them as to what the US actually wanted, how far it was willing to go to impose its will, and whether a deal was possible. Thus in April 2004 US officials acknowledged improvements in Syrian measures against infiltrators but in May 2004, Bush nevertheless applied sanctions under SALSA accompanying it with an extraordinary piece of rhetoric overkill, charging that Syrian policy constituted a "*unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States*," According to Aziz Shukri, professor of international law at Damascus University, "there is a feeling of anger, despair and outrage. We don't know whom to believe," The only explanation for the incoherence of US policy, he believed, was that the State Department and the Pentagon had two contradictory policies toward Syria.

Syria made another wave of concessions over relations with the Iraqi regime and the Iraq borders in the summer of 2004. According to Samir al-Taqi, an independent Syrian analyst, Syria thought these concessions would show good intentions and lead to confidence building in US-Syrian relations."³³ Instead, however, Washington chose to strike at Syria's most vital interest of all --its sphere of influence in Lebanon.

Washington's Revenge: forcing Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon

Washington had long seen Lebanon as a point of vulnerability for Syria.³⁴ If Syria could be forced out of Lebanon, a pro-Western Lebanese government could be brought to sign a peace treaty with Israel; the Syrian regime, isolated and having suffered major loss of prestige, might collapse. In 2004 a chain of events in Lebanon allowed Washington to strike a major blow at Syria which seemingly fell into a trap being prepared for it. Apparently intent on heading off any challenges to its control over Lebanon, Syria engineered a change in the Lebanese constitution allowing its main Lebanese ally, President Emile Lahoud to assume another term. Lahoud is heir to the Shihabist tradition among Maronites that see Lebanon as Arab and the presidency not an instrument of Maronite interests; this and his close alignment with Syria meant he had little popularity in the Maronite community but, as ex-head of the Lebanese army, he controlled the Lebanese security establishment. Lahoud's rivals, Hariri and Druze leader, Walid Junblatt objected to a new term. Hariri apparently enlisted France's Chirac, a close friend who, perhaps seeking to heal the breach with Washington over Iraq, formed a tactical alliance with the US in the Security council to sneak through UN resolution 1559 in September 2004 calling on Syria (without actually naming it) to withdraw from the country and for Hizbollah to disarm, despite the protest of the Lebanese government against this interference in its

sovereign affairs. This change in French policy, from a buffer against to a facilitator of, US threats against Syria was a major diplomatic setback for Damascus, and demonstrated a revived propensity for the core states, temporarily split over the US invasion of Iraq, to bandwagon with the hegemon.

Syria was taken wholly by surprise. It had misread US intentions over Lebanon (where Washington used to see Syria as a stabilising force.) , believing its rhetoric on withdrawal was meant to get Syrian concessions over Iraq-- which Syria was delivering. It also had not expected Chirac's alliance with the US on the issue. Alarmed, Syria now moved to further comply with other US demands as a way of heading off those in Lebanon. Top Hamas leaders, Khaled Mashal and Imad al-Alami, left Damascus. A senior US delegation visited Damascus to arrange Syrian-US co-ordination over the Iraq border and Secretary of State Colin Powell praised Syria's co-operation.³⁵ That Israel chose this juncture to assassinate a Hamas official in Damascus was widely seen as either an Israeli effort to stop Syrian-US reapproachment or a double-game on the part of Washington in which it would pocket Syrian concessions, but keep up the pressure and give nothing in return.

It was, however, the assassination of Hariri that energised a convergence of forces against Syria's position in Lebanon. Did Syria engineer the killing? It seems inconceivable that any Syrian leader would not have anticipated the way the Hariri killing would be used, as it has been, against Syria; if one invokes the traditional legal principle *quo bono* (who benefits), the killing was tailor-made to serve the interest of the US neo-cons.³⁶ Nevertheless, many were willing to believe Syrian guilt, sparking an enormous backlash that greatly weakened Syria's position. A cross-sectarian alliance formed in Lebanon, bringing together the Sunnis (Hariri's constituency) with the Maronites and Druze against Syria and putting Lebanese Shia, Syria's closest allies, on the defensive. Saudi Arabia's, another of Hariri's patrons, but a long-time Syrian ally, demanded Syrian withdrawal, Europe and Washington were in accord on it, and no power defended Damascus from these pressures. Russia, once an ally, was unwilling to sacrifice any credit in the West for the sake of Syria and joined the bandwagon. UN officials threatened total isolation and punitive sanctions. Faced with this coalition of forces, and fearful that continued defiance of the UN in the face of an aroused world, would make Damascus the target of selective enforcement, Damascus apparently lost its nerve and withdrew its troops. Its alliance with Hizbollah and other Lebanese actors remains intact, and it can probably still veto any separate Lebanese peace with Israel that the US might attempt to promote, but Lebanon can no longer said to be in Syria's uncontested sphere of influence; indeed the struggle for Lebanon appears to be re-opened.

If Syria hoped that this major concession would appease Washington, it was badly mistaken; it only wet the appetite of the neo-cons for more and strengthened hard-liners who argue that threats work better than compromise in dealing with Syria (SyriaComment.com Friday, June 03, 2005). The US now appears committed to a policy of what Flyntt Leverett has called "regime change on the cheap." In fact, Washington had thought the forced withdrawal from Lebanon might precipitate regime collapse. Besides tightening economic sanctions, Washington now looks set to begin funding opposition groups, with a "Syria Liberation Act" on the Iraqi precedent being broached in congress.

If so, this marks a watershed in US intentions. 2 May 2005 Financial Times: .Previously, "prevailing wisdom, particularly within the State

Department and intelligence communities, has been that Islamists would stand a good chance of stepping into a void left by the [removal of the Al-Asad regime]." In fact, the fear of an Islamist take-over has been the main factor deterring Washington from an energetic push against the regime; They were also wary, after being burned in Iraq of "exile-led" advocacy groups, such as Farid Ghadry's Washington based "Syria Reform Party" which in fact is of far less significance than were its Iraqi counterparts.³⁷ But as Murhaf Jouejati pointed out, the neo-cons success in shifting the blame for intelligence failures in Iraq from their own machinations to the CIA had ironically weakened the professional analysts most likely to oppose Syria's de-stabilisation. The neo-cons were now arguing that regime change in Syria was the key to winning in Iraq and that Islamists would not necessarily be the beneficiaries.³⁸ They were hoping that the Hariri assassination can be pinned on Syria and used to construct some international legitimation for actions against it.

Whether the neo-cons can isolate Syria as they did Saddam depends on the position of Europe. Although some European officials thought Syria should be rewarded for its evacuation of Lebanon, the US pressured the EU not to sign the association agreement with Syria, pending the outcome of investigations into the assassination of Hariri (and other anti-Syrian Lebanese figures). EU officials expressed concern that Washington has gotten itself into an ideological straight-jacket on the Syrian question; but European governments seemed willing to defer to Washington.

In the Spring of 2005, the Syrian regime, sensing the futility of appeasement, reversed its policy of concessions. Intelligence and military co-operation with the US over terrorism and the Iraq border was ended while Syria played host to Palestinian leaders critical of the Palestinian Authority's accommodation with Sharon. Syria test-fired Scud missiles. According to Joshua Laudis, Bashar was sending a message that pressure and hostility did *not* work.³⁹

Locked into a policy of threat and sanctions against Syria, does Washington have any other options if Syria remains obdurate? In mid-2005 military action against Syria did not seem to be in the cards. Obviously if it is willing to pay the costs, the US can do militarily what it wants to Syria, as it did against Iraq, since there is no balance of power or normative constraints that can really constrain it. Since Syria is not isolated or demonized as was Saddam Hussein, the US would pay higher diplomatic costs, unless the Hariri affairs can be used against it. Syria does have a certain non-conventional deterrent, but it is unlikely it could inflict much damage on US invasion forces. But, as Iraq has shown, the real military costs would come from pacifying a conquered Syria where the US would be much harder pressed to find collaborators and would have no comparable oil resources to fund its occupation. As Iraq shows, the Bush administration is keen to limit troop commitments and loath to incur troop casualties or bear economic costs; to critics, it wants "empire on the cheap," but it is already running up against "imperial overstretch." The military is overcommitted and the US probably cannot take on another war and occupation without instituting the draft, raising taxes and generally imposing sacrifices on Americans for the sake of war with a state that offers no threat to the US. The manufacturing of threat did work with Iraq but, given the deception and miscalculation exposed in that case, elite and public opinion would be less easily persuaded of a Syrian threat and a military solution to it.

The Impact of US Policy on Syria

Many believe Washington policy has been to humiliate Syria because it is the last remaining voice of Arab nationalism that has stood up to Israel and opposed the Iraq war. It seeks to teach the lesson that Arab nationalism, now regularly demonized in American discourse, as an evil ideology, is very costly and has to be given up. The final destruction of Arabism would help clear the way for a pro-Israeli Pax American in the region; conversely Washington's failures in Iraq and Syria's resistance to its demands raise the prestige of the Syrian regime and its ideology.⁴⁰ The US and Syria seem locked in a zero-sum game.

In this struggle, Washington has clearly succeeded in depriving Syria of some of the "cards" by which it exercised political leverage in regional politics and especially towards Israel, most notably its dominant role in Lebanon. Equally important the Bush administration's devaluation of the traditional goals of US Middle East policy, regional stability and the peace process, has correspondingly devalued the "cards" by which Syria could promise to deliver or obstruct these goals. Also Syria is increasingly isolated from other Arab regimes over their bandwagoning with Washington in the Iraq war and over the Lebanon/Hariri affairs. It might be that this has merely reinforced objective trends already entrain for the last decade which narrow Syria's Pan-Arab stature: the disappearance of the financial support Syria once got as a front line state in the struggle with Israel and the degrading of the military deterrent against Israel since the end of Soviet support. Washington seeks to drive a final nail into Syria's Pan-Arab coffin.

Given that the Syrian regime's main legitimacy has long rested on the its claim to act for Syrian Arab nationalism and the apparent victories on its behalf of Hafiz al-Asad's foreign policy, the legitimacy of Bashar's regime might be expected to be suffering from its recent reverses. If Hafiz was respected for his strength, Bashar has been humiliated by his inability to respond to American or Israeli military provocations and his forced evacuation of Lebanon. To Arab nationalist-minded Syrians, Bashar seems to have squandered the "cards" his father left him. For others, the mounting costs that the defense of Arabism is inflicting on Syria, combined with the me-first policies of the other Arab states and the recent anti-Syrian animosity displayed by many Lebanese, has stimulated a certain growth of a "little Syrian" identity at least partly divorced from Arabism. To the extent this is the long term outcome, Washington will have won.

Yet there are counter-forces and indicators: the very fact that Washington targets the regime for its stands on behalf of still popular *Arab* causes--its support of Palestine, its association with Hizbollah and its opposition to the invasion of Iraq--generates a certain solidarity between regime and people--and conversely concessions to the Americans cost some of this legitimacy. Many Syrians, feeling victimised by the US-orchestrated global demonization of Syria over its Lebanon presence, rallied around the government rather than turning against it. Secondly, the chaos and sectarian conflict in Iraq, together with the fear ignited by the Kurdish riots of 2003 and the rise of Islamic militancy, that the "Iraqi disease" could spread to Syria leads the public to put a high premium on stability and generates support for the regime that ensures it: it is a "legitimacy because of a worse alternative."⁴¹

Implications for sovereignty, hegemony, and world order

The Hegemon in the Middle East.

To a great extent, the benign phase of US hegemony was a function of bi-polarity. In a bi-polar world, the constraints on America's use of force in the Middle East forced it to operate as an off-shore balancer using the rivalries and needs of regional states for an outside protector to spread its influence. This role was largely exercised on behalf of the regional stability needed to secure access to oil by the world capitalist economy. Bipolarity combined with the value the US put on Middle East stability gave Syria leverage: protected by the USSR it could threaten to or actually act against US policy if its interests were ignored; it could, conversely promise to deliver stability if its interests were accommodated and in the 1990s, in particular, US and Syrian interests converged over resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Once relieved by the systemic structure of the constraints of the bi-polar balance of power, however, the US had less incentive to restrain itself, but the change to unipolarity did not immediately lead to a change in behaviour; this took the rise to power of a new revisionist force--the neo-cons and superhawks. From off-shore balancer, they made the US into a direct and partisan party to multiple conflicts in the Middle East. Believing US power to be overwhelming, they expected to use military force or "constructive" de-stabilization against states like Syria and Iraq that they deemed recalcitrant with little risk or cost. Indeed, for the neo-cons, the more the region is in chaos, the more the Israeli alliance is seen as the only alternative for protecting US interests; for them, it is crucial that stable moderate regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Syria should not be seen as compatible with US hegemony since, in that case, the US would potentially seek to accommodate their interests at the expense of Israel's expansion and settlement project—as the elder Bush seemed to do in the early nineties. But the "blowback" from this policy--the spread of terrorism, soaring oil prices--suggested that the hegemon had gone from providing public goods to inflicting public costs on the rest of the world system--from benign to malign hegemony. This behaviour might be thought compatible, if not with mainstream defensive realism, then at least with the offence realism of Meirsheimer, who sees great powers in a ceaseless drive for power. But even he roots this drive in insecurity and exempts the hegemon which is, per se, expected to be a satisfied power with a stake in the status quo, making it a stabiliser and off-shore balancer.

The costs of Bush's policies might be thought, insofar as the hegemon is a unitary rational actor, as realism believes, into withdrawing from imperial overreach, and pragmatically deal with Syria in order to facilitate exit from the Iraqi swamp; instead the US refuses any accommodation of Syria's interests. This rigidity might be attributed to the propensity of the Bush administration to sacrifice "national interests" to ideology. To be sure, the administration has framed the situation in terms of ideology, of 'good and evil,' but this ideology corresponds to and aims to legitimise the pursuit of interests; perhaps not US "national interests"--but certainly those of the ruling group.

What is obscured by realism's assumption of states as unitary rational actors and only visible if we desegregate the hegemon, is mounting evidence that US power is being wielded in pursuit of the highly particularistic interests--of the factions in power--Israeli expansionism, control of Iraqi oil--who have deftly exploited the insecurity unleashed by 9/11. For them instability in Iraq is a price worth paying since it is Iraqis and ordinary US taxpayers and soldiers that pay it; indeed as long as Iraq is in disarray its government is in no position

to demand a US withdrawal, and continued occupation secures control over Iraqi oil by the interests around Bush and Cheney. It also obstructs any recovery of Iraqi power that might encourage Arab nationalism and pose a challenge to Israel. Washington circles acquiesce in this policy, seeing an Iraqi client state is the key to resolving the contradiction between access to oil and support for Israeli expansionism.

Explaining Syrian Defiance of the Hegemon.

Syrian behaviour appears irrational or at least miscalculated from a utilitarian viewpoint: Syria's stand against the invasion of Iraq had no chance of actually deterring the US and was potentially suicidal while bandwagoning with Washington, the choice of every other Arab state, could have given Syria a share of the spoils or some side-payments. What makes Syria different? The constructivist view that *identity*--in this case Syria's Arab nationalist identity--shapes states' conceptions of their *interests* frames the issue more convincingly. Syria's state formation which frustrated its identity more than in many other Arab states and led to the incorporation of revisionist social forces, put it on an exceptionally durable Arab nationalist foreign policy tangent. Yet, obviously material factors, in their congruence with or divergence from identity were also important in explaining Syrian behaviour. For one thing, Syria's relative economic self-sufficiency, or at least its lack of economic dependency on the US differentiates it from vitally every other Arab state. For another, regime survival is as much a primary determinant of behaviour as in other states, but the Syrian regime is caught, more than other Arab states, between the identity-based requisites of survival, that is nationalist legitimacy, and the material factors--US power preponderance.

Indeed, a notion of rationality as defined within the parameters of an Arab nationalist identity is quite compatible with the Syria's intricate balancing act of defiance and concessions in its interactions with the US, its use of its "cards" to negotiate rather than simply bow to US demands, combined with incremental concessions needed to head off US punishment. Syria's problem is, it that confronts an ideologically driven hegemon that, confident in its military capabilities, is unwilling to bargain. When identity is incongruent with material factors (US power) as arguably is largely the case with Syria, its pursuit will incur high costs which, in turn may re-socialise a state, in this case narrowing identity from the Arab to the Syrian level.

Syria in a contested world order

At another level, that of Syria's tactics and methods, Syria's behaviour is shaped by uncertainty about the kind of world order in which it must operate, and in which the rules remain contested and inconsistent. In the old Cold War world of realpolitik, Hafiz had used a combination of limited force by proxies and diplomacy to bargain with superior powers in advancing Syrian national interests, with such success that Syria was, despite its limited base of national power, seen to "punch above its weight" in regional and international politics. Believing that law, legitimacy and diplomacy were toothless without military power, Hafiz developed the capabilities that allowed him to play power politics even as Syria entered peace negotiations with Israel, notably in its support of the pressure Hizbollah put on the Israelis in southern Lebanon. And it was because Syria had struck a deal with the hegemon in the first Iraq war that it enlisted American third party mediation within which UN land for peace resolutions allowed it to negotiate with Israel from a position of relative

parity. There was congruence between Syria's power position and the norms it invoked to serve its interests.

Bashar, on the other hand, is a creature of a paradoxical post-Cold war order era, in which the ideological superstructure--norm that international law and the UN should eclipse power politics was incongruent with a unipolar global power distribution that undergirded it. This, combined with the decline in Syria's power position, now sharply biased the interpretation of the norms to Syria's disadvantage. The second Iraq war in particular convinced Syria that the world had regressed to a lawless jungle, as foreign minister Sharaa put it, in which the global hegemon, placing itself above the rules, uses illegitimate force against smaller countries. It is a world in which the core states lay down the law of proper behaviour for others, while selectively observing it in their own cases or that of their allies.

In this world, international legitimacy is very selectively interpreted and enforced. Syria insists that under the UN charter resistance to foreign occupation is a legitimate right, but Israel and the US, with the consent of most of the core powers, successfully cast such activity as illegitimate terrorism (obviously, there is some overlap in the two categories which provides room for contestation but in this the voice of a small power is inevitably lost). Similarly, in the brouhaha over the so-called WMD threat, Syria's chemical deterrent is targeted, Israel's nuclear one is exempted and Syria's proposals to make the Middle East a WMD-free zone, in which the two capabilities would be treated equally, is rebuffed by Washington. This is what Chubin ⁴²calls "selective non-proliferation"--that is non-proliferation is for likes of Syria, Iran and Iraq--whose security needs are dismissed--but Israel. though the strongest military power in the region, is allowed to be a proliferator. It is Syria's great misfortune that its main enemy, Israel is almost uniquely exempted from the rules that apply to other similar-sized powers by virtue of its special relation with Washington.

Determined not to be victimized and convinced that Syria could not rely, on law and the UN for self-defense, the Bashar regime reverted in a limited way to real-politik, trying to play the politics of bargaining with the Israeli-Washington combination: to trade co-operation for concessions, risking the second-hand use of force by proxies such as hizbollah and prepared to tolerate some movement of jihadis into Iraq. But it has discovered that similar actions are selectively legitimized or de-legitimised contingent of a state's power position. Thus, while Syria's relatively benign occupation of Lebanon, ending a murderous civil war, and legitimised by virtue of it being on the right side of hegemonic power in the 1991 Iraq war, was now de-legitimised owing to its position on the wrong side of the hegemon in 2003. Meanwhile, the occupation in Iraq, though imposed by murderous violence, in defiance of the UN was ex-post facto legitimized and resistance to it de-legitimised under UN resolutions. Similarly, Israel enjoys impunity in its colonisation and use of violence in the Palestinian occupied territories in violation of the Geneva convention and countless UN resolutions.

At the same time though, global norms, above all sovereignty but also UN resolutions, are still valued in Damascus as giving some protection from the US and some potential leverage over Israel in regard to the occupied territories, should US power calculations change. Moreover, such norms are important in that if Syria can be construed to be on the wrong side of international legitimacy, Washington can use it to make Syria a victim of

selective enforcement. These considerations were foremost in shaping Syria's decision to comply with UN demands it withdraw from Lebanon

IR theory, the world order and the third world.

What is the shape of the world order, as it impacts on the third world? For realists, an order is either hierarchic or anarchic, with the former applies inside states, the latter applies without. This sharp dichotomy has been widely contested. What does the encounter between the USA and Syria tell us?

Liberalism, international society and certain constructivist interpretations have proposed notions of a world order both decentralised (anarchic) yet norm or law-bound where international institutions and law constrain power. This may hold in the core, but it is hard to see much evidence for it in core-periphery relations where it gives a very one-sided view of world order, neglecting entirely how norms and ideology are used as instruments of power.

Thus, while the end of the Cold war may have relatively empowered the UN, its role has been transformed. While once the UN was an arena that allowed the combined moral voice of non-aligned nations to constrain the superpowers and a buffer protecting their sovereignty against great power intervention, the UN seems increasingly captured by the core great powers which, when they are united, is manipulated to undermine sovereignty in the periphery. When they are split, as over the invasion of Iraq, the organisation is simply by-passed by the hegemon which puts itself above the law. The UN's failure to condemn the invasion of Iraq and its legitimisation of the occupation even suggests we risk slippage back to the era of the League of Nations when the international institution was paralysed by the unwillingness of great powers to act collectively against wars of aggression by their peers against weaker states and was used to hand out so-called mandates to rule over states supposedly not prepared for self-determination.

Reflective of this, third world analysts have stressed the hierarchic character of the world order. Yet, while the oligarchic practice of world governance has introduced a element of hierarchy into the anarchy of the states system, this remains far from the bureaucratic hierarchy in which central authority has a monopoly of legitimate force and issues legitimate commands and more nearly resembled a feudal order that combines elements of anarchy or hierarchy. The US is attempting to act, in its dealings with Syria as if the world were a hierarchy of command in which it need not bargain but merely lays down the law, but with only limited success. Despite its sole superpower status, it still enjoys nowhere near a monopoly of force and even less of "legitimate" use of force. Rather, we have a situation where, in the absence of legitimate authority, the strong "take the law into their own hands" and bend it to suit their interests. Yet, sovereignty is still a sufficient protection that the hegemon has to isolate and demonize a state before it is able to legitimise assaults on their sovereignty. And even then, despite its overwhelming military superiority, the ability of its targets to wage asymmetric warfare means it faces the constraints of "imperial overreach." In this scenario, as the Syrian case shows, sticks without carrots, cannot insure compliance if the hegemon cannot readily legitimate the use of force or imperial overstretch prohibits it and if the target state is willing to pay the high costs of defiance.

¹**Shahram Chubin** argues that the south sees its newly won **sovereignty under seige** in the new world order: the north, having vanguardised check on its power built into bi-

polarity, became increasingly assertive about the superiority of its way, ready to **intervene** in internal affairs of states in defense of ostensibly international standards.

²Yair Evron,

³Raymond Hinnebusch, in *Burden Sharing*

⁴Raymond Hinnebusch, Does Syria want Peace,

⁵Sherle R. Schwenninger, "Revamping American Grand Strategy," *World Policy Journal*, 20:3, Fall 2003,

⁶Flyntt Leverett

⁷Leverett

⁸Lverett

⁹ Markovsky, January 19, 2001; *Middle East International*, February 9, 2001, p 12; Yotam Feldner, "Escalation Games: Part II: Regional And International Factors Between Washington and Damascus: Iraq," *MEMRI*, May 25, 2001.

¹⁰James Bamford gives a summary of the original objectives of the neocons in his recent book, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies*. A 1996 document, "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," drafted by a team of advisers to Benjamin Netanyahu by current Bush advisers Richard Perle and Douglas Feith. called for "striking Syrian military targets in Lebanon, and should that prove insufficient, *striking at select targets in Syria proper*." (The Nation, November 3, 2003 issue Is Syria Next?). A report 'in 2000 by Middle East Forum (MEF) head, United States Committee for a Free Lebanon (USCFL), authored by Daniel Pipes and Ziad Abdelnour, who heads the USCFL strongly criticized Washington's policy of engaging Syria rather than confronting it, called for a preemptive war on Syria using Israeli proxy forces in Lebanon and Israeli forces to strike at Syrian targets if needed. A way to win American support for a preemptive war against Syria, they suggested, was by "drawing attention to its weapons of mass destruction program." These reports were signed by Bush's chief deputy on the Middle East on the National Security Council, Elliott Abrams; Undersecretary of Defence for Policy Douglas Feith; Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, Paula Dobriansky; and two special consultants associated with the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI) who have been working on Mideast policy in the Pentagon and State Department, respectively, Michael Rubin and David Wurmser. The signers also included Richard Perle, the powerful former chairman of the Pentagon's Defence Policy Board, his colleague at AEI, Michael Ledeen, Frank Gaffney, a former Perle aide in the Reagan administration who now heads the Centre for Defence Policy and David Steinmann, chairman of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA). Immediately before the Iraq invasion, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton traveled to Israel and promised Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that "it will be necessary to deal with threats from Syria, Iran, and North Korea afterwards." David Frum and Richard Perle (January 7, 2004 *Wall St. Journal*) contended in reference to Syria that, "When the door [to democracy] is locked shut by a totalitarian deadbolt, American power may be the only way to open it up." and in their 2003 book *An End to Evil*, advocate regime change in Syria, Cuba, North Korea and Iran.

¹¹ Jim Lobe, "Bush Stance on Syria Hit Shows Neocons Still Hold Sway," Interpress Service, October 8, 2003; *Middle East International* (MEI), 21/11/03, p. 25; Seymour Hersh in the July 28 issue of the New Yorker Magazine, cited in Hussein Ibish, dailystar.com.lb, 26/09/03. One CIA analyst told Hersh, "the quality and quantity of information from Syria exceeded the agency's expectations." Yet, the analyst added, the Syrians "got little in return for it." What they got instead was an unrelenting Washington-sponsored campaign of vilification. (The Nation, November 3, 2003)

¹² Stalinsky and Carmeli, "The Syrian...Media;" Oxford Business Group. Online Briefing, 31. 03.2003

¹³ al-Safir, March 27, 2003.

¹⁴ MEI, 2 May 03, p.13; UPI Apr 03; Financial Times, August 26, 2003; International Herald Tribune, July 16, 2003 p6.

¹⁵ MEI, 4/4/03 pp. 9, 25.

¹⁶ Washington Post, October 29, 2003; MEIB Vol.5. No.6, June 03; MEI 25 July 03, p 7.

¹⁷ Financial Times, August 26, 2003; Federal News Service, June 18, 2003.

¹⁸ Anders Strindberg, "America's nonsensical Syria policy," MEI, July 25, 2003,

¹⁹ Bashar Al-Assad, Interview with *Al-Arabiya* in MEMRI, June 22, 2003.

²⁰ The Times, Oct 21, 2003; MEI, 5 Dec 03, pp. 19-21.

²¹ MEIB, Nov., 2003 ;The Oxford Business Group, Online Briefing, 22.08.2003; MEI 24 Oct 03, pp 8-9.

²² nytimes.com/2003/12/01

²³ Yair Evron

²⁴ *Al-Hayat*, September, 28, 2001. According to Syria analyst at the RIIA, Rime Allaf, Hamas and Islamic Jihad's military eadership is in the Palestinian territories, closing the groups Damascus offices would have no effect on them, and the US knows this.

²⁵ **(Bush Stance on Syria Hit Shows Neocons Still Hold Sway by Jim Lobe**, Inter Press Service) **October 8, 2003**. International Herald Tribune, Oct 14, 2003 p13)

²⁶ Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Washington, DC, October 30, 2003. Seymour Hersh reported in the July 28, 2003 New Yorker that the CIA had told him that Syria passed on hundreds of files of crucial data regarding al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic groups in the Middle East and that "the quality and quantity of information from Syria exceeded the agency's expectations" but that Syria "got little in return for it" except neo-con-inspired hostility. (Seymour Hersh "The Syrian Bet," New Yorker Magazine, 27 July 03 And New York Times, 6 Feb 2004; "Is Syria Next?" The Nation, Nov .3 2003).

²⁷ NYT December 1, 2003

²⁸ The Guardian, October 21, 2003; Arabicnews.com,10/10/03.

²⁹ Walid Choucair, "The Syrian-American Crisis," al-Hayat, 01 Aug, 2003.

³⁰ Prior to the Iraq war, President Bush discouraged the pro-Israeli congressmen behind the bill by observing that the U.S. had "both serious differences and areas of common interest with Syria. Managing our complex relationship with Syria requires a careful and calculated use of all the options we have to advance U.S. interests."

Secretary of State Powell told congress that the bill would "have a negative effect on our efforts to bring down the violence, avoid the outbreak of regional war, and help the parties to a path to comprehensive peace." He added, "New sanctions on Syria would place at risk our ability to address a range of issues directly with the Syrian government and to change Syrian behaviour." (Secretary Of State Colin L. Powell, Letter To Senator Joseph R. Biden Regarding The Syria Accountability Act, May 3, 2002; President George W. Bush, Letter To Congressman Robert I. Wexler Regarding Syria's Relations With Iraq And The Syria Accountability Act, September 3, 2002.

³¹Stephen Zunes, "The Syrian Accountability Act And The Triumph Of Hegemony." FPIF Policy Report, October 2003.

³² Middle East Intelligence Bulletin (MEIB) Vol. 6 No 5 May 2004.

³³The Daily Star (Beirut), 08 September, 2004.

³⁴Leverett, *Inheriting Syria*, p.

³⁵Time Magazine

³⁶Syria was irritated by Hariri's maneuverings, and the hearsay is that Bashar al-Asad threatened him; but Hariri had had similar clashes with Damascus in the past that had been settled and the two shared an interest in Lebanese stability; Hariri had close connections in the Damascus establishment (notably with the Sunni "Old guard"); and, given the checks and balances in the Lebanese political system, it was never likely that he could mount a major challenge to Syria, even if he had so wished. Some believe the rivalry of the cross-broader alliances, splitting the elites of both countries, turned nasty.

³⁷ Stephen Bosco, "**The Syrian Domino?**," Harvard Political Review May 2004.

³⁸In 2004 neo-con Michael Ladeen claimed in the National Review that Hizbollah was the sponsor of the insurgency in Iraq and behind it was Syria and Iran; the US needed to attack them in order to win in Iraq.

³⁹ SyriaComment.com, June 03, 2005.

⁴⁰ Ashraf Fahim The Daily Star Saturday, April 24, 2004.);

⁴¹ Al-Ahram Weekly Online 16 - 22 June 2005; David Hurst in LA Times 7 June 05.

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