Syria’s Foreign Policy in the Regional Penumbra

By Zakia Aqra

Syria’s foreign policy has been in a penumbra caused by regional developments and shifts in the international balance of power, which at times granted Damascus opportunities to promote its interests, while, at other times, deprived it from room for maneuver. Simultaneously, distrust was a constant factor in its foreign policy formation, which derived from the perception of continuous betrayal from Arab allies especially after the 1973 War, which left Syria alone to strive for the return of the Golan Heights. The elements of mistrust along with the volatility of the regional and international system forced Syria to rely on strong allies in order to promote its interests and retain (or improve) its position in the region. In this sense, Damascus’ foreign policy balanced on a tightrope; a paradoxical state in between not capitulating what was vital for its strategic interests and its prestige and bargaining from a relatively weaker position.

Failing to recapture the Golan Heights in the 1973 War, Syria realized that it had to rearrange its alliances. While it never pursued genuine territorial capitulation, Damascus proceeded in seeking Henry Kissinger’s mediation to secure “a satisfactory disengagement agreement in the Golan (May 1974)” In the eyes of the Syrians, if played correctly, the US would have considered negotiating a deal with Damascus for the Golan Heights, just as it did with Egypt for the Sinai. The first attempt between Syria and the US that entertained the idea of signing a non-belligerency agreement with Israel would not have occurred if Egypt had not finalized the Interim Agreement of 1975. On the one hand, Syria had realized that although a fully comprehensive political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict based on UN Resolutions 242/1967 and 338/1973 would never be complete without Syria, Hafez al-Assad was losing his clout and had to establish Syria’s relevance in the regional balance of power. On the other hand, Syria would not bargain for what was vital for its strategic interests and its prestige. The paradox between bargaining from a relatively weaker position while insisting on its interests, namely, the Golan Heights, was not as irrational as it might seem. In fact, when the US welcomed Syria’s intervention in the Lebanese civil war in 1976, it was viewed as an acknowledgment of Syria’s significance in the region, especially since Damascus considered Lebanon a natural extension of Syria in the first place, even if it had to concede to limitations such as the so-called red-line agreement—which allowed Syria to send its troops into Lebanon provided they did not deploy south of the Litani River. Yet, despite Syria’s cooperation in Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli peace process was being compartmentalized starting with the separate peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1979, which left Syria on the side. Egypt deserted Syria – once again – in a unilateral peace treaty with Israel as opposed to a holistic Arab-Israeli peace process.

With a sentiment of betrayal, Syria felt that it had to compensate for its lost prestige and opted for a military build-up. The revisionist climate set by the Islamic Revolution in Iran followed by Tehran’s war with Syria’s ‘arch enemy’ Iraq set the tone for Hafez al-Assad to build up a stronger military profile in order to attain further relevance in the changing environment of the region. Revolutionary Iran offered Assad a potential ally to counter-balance the Israeli-US alliance. Under this prism, the informal cooperation with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war developed into a broad alliance in the 1980s, boosting Syria’s diplomatic and military weight. While this opened a window of opportunity, Israel’s 1982 invasion in Lebanon set off the alarm for Syria to expand its military in an attempt to gain parity with Israel. In fact, Syria’s armed forces were disproportionately large for the country’s size with “5000 tanks, 650 combat aircrafts 102 missiles and over 500,000 combat personal” With tremendous political and financial support from the Soviet Union at the time, the concept of the military build-up was framed in a
‘doctrine of strategic balance, or military parity with Israel’, as a deterrent to Israel, and a leverage in the negotiations for a political settlement on the Golan Heights. To a certain extent, Damascus’ build-up achieved its goal as it “produced mutual deterrence that relatively stabilized the Syrian-Israeli military confrontation”. Nevertheless, while the regional revisionist ambience benefited Damascus, the changes in the international balance of power gravely limited Syria’s options. In a sense, Damascus’ regional opportunity to move ‘one step forward’ was offset by the gradual retreat of the Soviet Union from the region, which forced Syria to move ‘two steps backward’. Soon Damascus economic limitations were coupled with 1987 Gorbachev’s loss of interest in continuing to sustain the military option in the Arab-Israeli settlement. However, Syria’s conundrum proved temporary, as the dawn of the post-Cold War era offered Syria – at least in the eyes of Assad – a golden opportunity to become relevant again.

Iraq’s invasion in Kuwait in 1990 was a launching pad not only for the US to fill the vacuum of power caused by the Soviet retreat, but also for Syria. As Damascus was unable to sustain its economy and was forced to reduce its military budget, Assad successfully compensated his shedding image by re-approaching the US and joining the anti-Iraq coalition. The symbolic contribution of Syria, which was limited to allocating a small number of troops without engaging in actual combat, came with financial assistance from the Gulf; investments channeled towards the state-run private sector that was crumbling the economy. Syria was opening up to new co-operations in the region; albeit far from forming alliances. In the wake of the Ta’if agreement, Damascus was able to establish a Pax Syriana in Lebanon, and sit on the table of the US-led Middle East peace process, which at the time seemed to have the potential for an overall comprehensive political resolution for the conflict, including the issue of the Golan Heights.

The Madrid peace process in 1991 was set to change the status quo in the Middle East. For Damascus, the time was ripe for Syria to regain the Golan Heights and to reassert its position in the region. For the first time, Israel, under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin, accepted that the UN Resolution 242 was applicable to the Golan; thus, demonstrating willingness to withdraw from the Golan Heights and to proceed with an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty. This willingness became known as the “deposit” as Rabin “deposited” a long list of conditions on the Israeli side to the US Secretary of State, Warren Christopher. As the momentum was intensifying, a series of events cut the lifeline of the Syrian-Israel peace process, bringing Syrian foreign policy in the penumbra for another time. The ambush of the Israeli – Palestinian deal in 1993 and Israeli – Jordanian peace treaty in 1994 enhanced Assad’s distrust, who already viewed with suspicion the long list of conditions put forward by Rabin. Assad felt once again betrayed by his Arab partners, namely Arafat and King Hussein (reminiscent of Sadat’s separate 1979 peace treaty), inevitably placing Syria in a relatively weaker position to negotiate.

This distrust was further fueled during the negotiations with the subsequent Israeli prime ministers, which extended – naturally – to the US and its credibility as a broker. By the time of the election of Benjamin Netanyahu, the prospects of a positive outcome from the peace process seemed gloomy. Netanyahu retained a hardline rhetoric against a ‘land for peace’ deal with Syria. And although Israel was engaging in secret negotiations with Damascus because, unlike Rabin, Netanyahu preferred a deal with Syria rather than with the Palestinians by principle, Netanyahu was not able to attain the necessary support to go through with it. At the same time, Assad viewed Netanyahu’s willingness as nothing more than a trap. To add to Syria’s insecurity, the Clinton’s administration seemed to have lost its grip over Israel and, by extension, its credibility to broker the peace process. The same logic of mistrust and insecurity applied during the Ehud Barak’s term that followed. It is worth mentioning that Syria’s distrust did not only stem from a self-preservation point of view given its relative weakness, but from a constant and almost consistent abandonment since the 1973 war from its negotiating partners and allies. The distrust overshadowed an almost done deal. Israel agreed to return the Golan Heights with the exception of a 5% that gave access to Lake Tiberius, which was already exploited by Israel and Syria had not been interested in, and a station on Mount Hermon for surveillance purposes. In the end, these rounds of negotiations were halted due to the fact that the new Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, in 2001 switched focus to
the Palestinian front as the Second Intifada started, and also because of new, constrained foreign policy of Bashar al-Assad, who needed to first consolidate power domestically as he was new to the Syrian political scene.

In 2003, the American War on Terror automatically placed Syria at the opposing camp, not only because Syria would gain nothing by joining the war, as it did in the 1990s, but also because of the rigid “with us or against us” rhetoric of the Bush administration. With the ‘axis of evil’ discourse in the air, Syria could only rely on its image as the last standing Arab country fighting against US and Israeli policies. With Iran on its side and a renewed friendship with Putin’s Russia, Syria was able to propagate and build an anti-occupation and anti-American rhetoric – since this time the aggressor was not another Arab country but a foreign power – that would boost its image as the protector of the region. At the same time, Damascus’s relevance was demonstrated pompously by assisting Iraqi Baath officials to find safe haven in Syria. Syria’s foreign policy towards the US was clearly reactionary. However, soon it became clear that Syria was desperate for a way out since its stance proved to be unmaintainable in the long run. This is the reason why Assad welcomed Nancy Pelosi, the new Speaker of the House of Representatives at the time, in Syria in 2007, who came with the purpose of driving the US foreign policy away from Bush’s rhetoric by bringing a positive message regarding an Israeli-Syrian deal from the newly elected Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Olmert.⁹ With the mediation of Turkey, Syria took advantage of the small opening to reattempt negotiations with Israel. Nevertheless, Tel Aviv’s logic had shifted from a simple formula “land for peace” to “a more comprehensive formula that included Syria’s relationship with Iran, Hizballah”¹⁰. This was a concession Assad was not willing to make. First, letting go of Tehran, who seemed to have the most natural and confident relation that Syria ever had with any other regional or international power, would weaken Syria’s position; and second, the history of mistrust cast serious doubts on Israel’s credibility. The strengthened alliance between Syria and Iran and, later, Russia was tested during the Syrian Civil War. Iran, as opposed to its Arab neighbours, demonstrated to be much more reliant in withstanding the challenges that Assad had to face as Syria became a battlefield for regional politics. Amidst a civil war that rendered his regime even weaker in many aspects, Assad was able to bring to the fore and hold its position on its vital interests. From a foreign policy perspective, Assad’s regime is far from re-engaging in a negotiation with Israel regarding the Golan Heights. Now, with Russia covering him, Assad’s foreign policy was able to tiptoe between military confrontation and diplomacy with Israel without escalation, as he was trying to regain his hold on Syrian territory controlled by the opposition, and thus returning to the previous status quo on the border. The pattern that was established in Syria’s foreign policy since the 1973 war, which was to constantly stand or walk on a tightrope has not faded away even with the wounds and damages of as of now near ten-year civil war. Although the region is still far from a status quo and the Assad regime still has many challenges before it consolidates itself within the country again, it still remains to be seen whether the new alliances and regional balance of power may offer a genuine opportunity to establish a new pattern away from the penumbra.

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This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund- ESF) through the Operational Programme “Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning” in the context of the project “Strengthening Human Resources Research Potential via Doctorate Research” (MIS-5000432), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY).
Bibliography


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8 Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria’s Waiting Game*, 81-82.
10 Ibid., xi.