

Footprints in ‘Syrian Sand’:European Political Interaction from Colonialism to the Arab

Spring

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1 Introduction

This work seeks to explore the complex landscape of Syria's political history and trace the European influence, from the early twentieth century to contemporary times. At the core of this analysis lies the aim to understand the extent and manner in which European politics and foreign policies have shaped Syria's political landscape, exploring into the depths of influence, intervention, and their enduring legacy on this critical Middle Eastern country. It is pertinent to point out an essential observation: the transnational dynamics of European involvement have had multifaceted implications for Syria's political trajectory, contributing both to periods of conflict and opportunities for engagement and Syria's stability is inseparable from broader regional peace and security which also directly and indirectly impacts the international arena.

Methodologically, my research employs a historical-analytical approach, utilizing scholarly work, archival materials, diplomatic correspondences, and contemporary accounts to construct a coherent narrative. This involves a critical examination of primary sources and scholarly works to extract a detailed picture of the events, policies, and decisions that have shaped the trajectory of Syrian-European relations. Moreover, the study integrates insights from political science and international relations to interpret these historical developments within the broader context of global power politics and regional dynamics. Employing a multifaceted theoretical framework, my research leans on the theories of post-colonialism, realism, and monarchical authoritarianism to navigate the historical and political narratives that have defined Syrian-European exchanges during the 1916-1946 era.

Colonial legacies, as evidenced by the arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers, set the stage for future conflicts by ingraining deep societal divisions (Fromkin, 1989). The imposition of artificial borders and the fragmentation of Syria into multiple regions by the French authorities exemplify the colonial strategy of 'divide and rule,' which has had long-lasting effects on national unity and the fabric of Syrian society (Seale, 1965, p.). This period of direct control not only facilitated the emergence of a fragmented national identity but also laid the groundwork for the authoritarian regimes that followed independence, as post-colonial theorists argue that the colonial legacy often paves the way for authoritarian governance in post-colonial states (Chaitin, 2003). Furthermore, the socioeconomic structures established during the mandate period have perpetuated economic dependencies and disparities, contributing to contemporary challenges in

achieving sustainable development and economic independence in Syria (Hinnebusch, 2001). The post-colonial framework also offers insights into the cultural dynamics of post-independence Syria, where efforts to revive and preserve Syrian culture and identity have been seen as a form of resistance against colonial cultural erasure (Van Dam, 1996).

Using Hans Morgenthau's Realism, we can better understand the Assad regimes in Syria by looking at how they use power, prioritize the country's interests, and strive to survive in a world where no central authority exists. This approach helps explain both their actions within Syria and their interactions with other countries. Morgenthau's principles elucidate Syria's efforts to maintain and expand its power, exemplified by the suppression of internal dissent and strategic regional engagements aimed at asserting influence and security (Morgenthau, 1948). The Syrian leadership's actions, such as its involvement in Lebanon, alliance with Iran and Russia, and response to the Syrian Civil War, reflect a pragmatic approach to foreign policy that prioritizes the regime's survival and the country's strategic position over moral or ideological considerations (Hinnebusch, 2001; Phillips, 2015). This realist perspective underscores the Assad regimes' navigation of the complex balance of power in the Middle East, engaging in alliances and conflicts to counterbalance rival powers and Western intervention. The support from Russia and Iran, crucial for the regime's resilience against domestic uprisings and external pressures, highlights the significance of international alliances in the struggle for state survival within the anarchical structure of global politics (Lesch, 2012). By focusing on the pursuit of power and national interest, Morgenthau's Realism provides a nuanced understanding of Syrian political history, demonstrating how states operate in a global system where power politics and strategic interests drive actions and alliances (Morgenthau, 1948; Hinnebusch, 2001).

Monarchical authoritarianism refers to a political system where a monarchy exercises substantial or absolute power without effective constitutional limits or democratic oversight. In applying the concept of monarchical authoritarianism to Syrian political history, the Assad regimes illustrate a similar authoritarian grip on power, albeit within a republic rather than a traditional monarchy. The Assad family's rule over Syria can be analyzed through the lens of authoritarian practices typically associated with monarchies, emphasizing personalistic rule, the concentration of power, and the suppression of dissent. The Assad regimes have maintained power through a combination of political centralization, control over security and military forces, and the manipulation of sectarian and ethnic divisions to ensure regime stability and prevent opposition

cohesion (Perthes, 1997; van Dam, 2011). Although not a monarchy, the handover of authority from Hafez to Bashar al-Assad resembled hereditary succession, a characteristic feature of monarchical systems. This transition solidified the perception of Syria as a *de facto* personalistic authoritarian regime, where authority is centralized within the control of a single family (Zisser, 2001). Under both Assads, Syria has exhibited key features of monarchical authoritarianism, such as the lack of political pluralism, the suppression of political dissent through censorship, imprisonment, and violence, and the reliance on a loyal elite, often tied to the ruling family by kinship, sectarian, or ethnic bonds (Wedeen, 1999; Lesch, 2005). The regime has also leveraged state institutions to perpetuate its rule, using the Ba'ath Party, the military, and intelligence services as instruments of control and suppression (Seale, 1988; Hinnebusch, 2001). Furthermore, the Assad regime's approach to governance and power maintenance mirrors the patrimonial systems observed in some monarchies, where state resources are allocated based on loyalty rather than merit, and where the distinction between the state's and the ruling family's interests becomes blurred (Batatu, 1999; Lawson, 2010). In Syria, under the Assad family's rule, the country has been run much like a private domain, with the family and its allies holding tight control over economic and political power.

In the first chapter, the focus is directed towards the rich and complex historical exchange observed in Syrian-European relations, spanning from the early 20th century to the rise of Hafez Assad. The period for which the analysis will direct its focus towards is characterized by the emergence of Arab nationalism, European imperialistic endeavors, and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which critically influenced the formation of the modern Syrian state and its interactions with European powers particularly France and Great Britain. The chapter also sheds light on the British involvement in the region as British actions during World War I, aimed at undermining Ottoman influence while establishing a counterweight to French dominance, had long-lasting implications for Syria and the wider Middle Eastern region.

The first chapter begins with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, a major moment that set the foundation for the future political configuration of the Middle East, including Syria. Drawing from Khoury (1987) and Ottaway (2015), the thesis aims to explore the ramifications of colonialism, such as artificial borders and divide-and-rule strategies, on Syria's societal divisions and political instability. This era not only entrenched European interests and influence but also sowed seeds of division and discord that have echoed through Syria's subsequent political

development by engendering a legacy of conflict and division that would persistently shape Syria's internal dynamics and quest for sovereignty (Seale, 1989; Hinnebusch, 2014). The first chapter explores how these arbitrary divisions, often disregarding the natural connections within communities, led to long-standing tensions and divisions that have echoed throughout history.

Furthermore, the first chapter investigates the role of the French Mandate in Syria, a period characterised by significant transformations and resistance, such as the Great Syrian Revolt. Moving forward, the narrative examines Syria's journey through World War II and its aftermath, highlighting key moments such as the struggle for independence, the role of external powers, and the internal dynamics that shaped the nation post-1946. This includes an analysis of how the Cold War intrigues and the struggle for regional dominance further complicated Syria's political scene and how Syria became closely linked with the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) instead of positioning itself with the West. The complexities of Arab nationalism and state-building efforts in Syria, as discussed by Lesch (2012) and Seale (1997), will illustrate the tensions between national identity and the realities of state power. Through the decades, the analysis revealed a transition from direct colonial engagement to more nuanced forms of influence and interaction. Post-independence (1946), Syria's geopolitical significance, particularly during the Cold War, attracted varied European interests and interventions. The strategic alliances and engagements of this period underscored the ongoing significance of Syria within European foreign policy frameworks, even as the context shifted from imperial domination to geopolitical strategy. However, it also underscored the geopolitical complexities of the era, where Syria navigated the bipolar world order by leveraging its strategic alliances to assert its sovereignty and political independence (Eisenstadt and Pollack, 2001; Leverett, 2006). As the chapter progresses, the focus shifts to the era of the 1960s which saw the rise of Hafez al-Assad. Starting with the early years of Hafez al-Assad's presence in Syrian political history, it explores how European involvement transitioned over time, from cooperation agreements to more complex political and diplomatic engagements, influencing the course of the Syrian crisis and its implications. The consolidation of power under Hafez Al-Assad and the Baath Party provides a lens through which to examine authoritarianism and patronage politics. Through the works of Hinnebusch (2001) and Yapp (1996), I aimed to explore how this authoritarian regime-maintained control through coercion, patronage, and manipulation of sectarian identities, with a focus on the Alawite dominance in Syria.

The second chapter offers an exploration of the complex and dynamic relationship between Syria and Europe, against a backdrop of changing political scenarios and shifts in global power. It delves into the emergence and establishment of the Ba'ath regime, particularly focusing on how Hafez al-Assad's rise to power and his subsequent policy decisions were perceived and influenced by European political circles. The chapter also contextualizes Syria's strategic alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and its major role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and how these factors shaped European foreign policy and perspectives.

Additionally, the chapter looks at the significant influence of major regional conflicts, especially the Arab-Israeli wars, on European diplomatic strategies and policy reformation. It highlights the ways these events triggered a reassessment and evolution in Europe's approach towards the Middle East, with a special emphasis on Syria. The discussion extends to the economic changes within Syria, examining how these shifts intersected with European economic interests and prompted a significant reevaluation of European Middle Eastern policy towards a more nuanced, engagement-oriented strategy, as manifested in the Barcelona Declaration and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

In the post-Cold War period, the chapter analyzed how Syria adjusted its political and diplomatic strategies in response to the new world order. It reveals the complex and sometimes fluctuating nature of Syrian-European relations, influenced by regional conflicts, shifting alliances, and the changing dynamics of international politics. Throughout this section, the aim is to provide a detailed understanding of Syrian political history from a European viewpoint, looking into how historical events and policy choices in Syria have had an impact beyond its borders, shaping its interactions with European countries.

The third chapter analyzes the political developments in Syria during the 21st century, particularly under the era of Bashar al-Assad's leadership. It begins with the unexpected rise of Bashar al-Assad to power, following the tragic death of his brother Basil, and explores the subsequent changes in the country under his rule. This chapter captures the short period of potential reform known as the Damascus Spring and its sudden end. Syria's relations with key international players, especially the EU (European Union) and the US (United States), are then investigated. The evolution of these relationships over time, particularly in the context of the Syrian conflict, is discussed, examining the different responses and policies of different European countries and the wider international community. This section demonstrates the internal struggles within EU

members, particularly between major states like Germany and France, emphasizing the diverse visions and strategic objectives that have influenced their engagement with Syria. Central to this analysis is the impact of the Arab Spring on Syria, detailing how initial demands for reform transformed into a widespread civil war. This part looks into the emergence and influence of militant groups and the complex geopolitical dimensions of the crisis.

Finally, the chapter considers the difficult path Syria faces moving forward, discussing the role of the EU and its member states in this context. It concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of the Syrian crisis for regional stability and international relations, emphasizing themes of power, conflict, and the search for stability.

2 European Influence on Syrian Political Evolution: From World War I to Assad's Ascension

2.1 Sykes-Picot and the Fragmentation of the Middle East: Syria under the Shadow of French and British Interest

During the Ottoman Empire's tenure, Syria underwent significant administrative reorganization, initially consolidated into a singular province, or *eyalet*, before being restructured into multiple *eyalets* to enhance governance. By 1549, this reconfiguration resulted in the establishment of the *Eyalet*¹ of Damascus, alongside the newly formed *Eyalet* of Aleppo. Subsequent adjustments saw the creation of the *Eyalet* of Tripoli in 1579, encompassing regions such as Latakia, Hama, and Homs, followed by the inauguration of the *Eyalet* of Raqqa in eastern Syria in 1586. Despite these administrative reforms, the Ottoman rule was characterized by its inability to ensure harmonious coexistence among Syria's diverse societal factions. The empire's *millet*² system segmented communities based on religious affiliation—encompassing Shia Muslims, Greek Orthodox Christians, Maronites, Armenians, and Jews—into distinct legal entities. The *Tanzimat*³ reforms, culminating in the 1864 Ottoman law, marked a significant shift

1 An *eyalet* was an administrative division of the Ottoman Empire, functioning from the 15th to the 19th centuries. It is comparable to a province or state in modern terms.

2 The Ottoman Empire's *millet* system organized diverse religious groups into self-governed communities, each led by their own leaders and managing their personal and religious affairs, while remaining loyal to the Sultan.

3 The *Tanzimat* was a period of reform in the Ottoman Empire that lasted from 1839 to 1876, aimed at modernizing the state and consolidating its power.

towards standardizing provincial administration across the empire. This period saw the transformation of eyalets into smaller, more manageable provinces. The reforms also introduced provincial assemblies, which played a role in local administration. The territorial expanse of Greater Syria, under the Ottoman Empire's late-stage governance, extended to include what are today portions of Turkey and Iraq and Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary by a Serbian nationalist during his visit to Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, precipitated the issuance of a diplomatic ultimatum by Austria-Hungary, supported by Germany, to Serbia, which enjoyed Russia's backing. This series of events escalated a month later with the bombardment of Belgrade on July 28, thereby igniting the conflict known as World War I. Subsequently, Germany initiated a declaration of war against Russia on August 1, against France on August 3, and proceeded to invade Belgium on August 4. UK (United Kingdom) responded by declaring war on Germany on August 4, 1914, marking the official commencement of hostilities.

The Ottoman Empire, allying with Germany and Austria-Hungarian Empire, entered the war. The strategic plan of the Ottoman military operations aimed at alleviating the burden on its allies' European fronts through assaults against Russia along the Black Sea coastlines or in the Caucasus, and against Britain at the Suez Canal. Following the empire's engagement in the conflict, British forces occupied Basra on November 23, 1914, and advanced along the Tigris River, capturing Kut al-Amara by the end of September 1915 (Fieldhouse, 2008). However, after a siege lasting five months, the Ottoman Army succeeded in compelling the surrender of the British forces stationed there on April 28, 1916. Concurrently, British clandestine communications with Sharif Hussein of Mecca encouraged him to instigate a revolt against the Ottoman State, which he initiated on June 27, 1916 (Karsh and Karsh, 1997). In exchange for ambiguous assurances of Arab independence from the British, the Arab uprising in the Hijaz was initiated in 1916, spearheaded by Sharif Hussein and his son Faisal, a rebellion which was born out of the processes of sophisticated diplomatic negotiations, promises, and power plays between the French, British and local powers (Pierret, 2019).

The Arab Revolt⁴ subsequently spread across the Hejaz, Palestine, and Syria. During the years 1915 to 1917, a series of secret treaties facilitated the partition of Ottoman territories among

⁴ The uprising that began in June 1916 by Sharif Hussein bin Ali during World War I aimed to create an independent and united Arab state encompassing Aden in Yemen and Aleppo in Syria.

the Allied Powers, signaling the geopolitical reconfiguration of the region post-conflict. As highlighted by Demirel (2019), the rise of Arab nationalism in Syria was pivotal in molding the political landscape of the Middle East — burgeoning under the shadow of the declining Ottoman Empire, the movement found an unlikely ally in European powers, particularly France and Great Britain, each pursuing their strategic and cultural interests in the region. France's role, deeply rooted in its historical position as a religious protector since the 17th century, became increasingly pronounced in Syria and Lebanon (Khoury, 1987). The French intensified their cultural and religious engagements in these territories post-1900, and in turn, Syrian nationalists, seeking autonomy, leveraged French interests to propel their nationalist cause.

This dynamic was particularly observed in Lebanon, where the Maronites⁵ initiated rebellion movements, along with other Arab nationalist movements in Syria, which achieved momentum with the backing of the French Government (Demirel, 2019). France, aimed to maintain its longstanding connections with the Catholics of Syria, establish a strategic and economic foothold in the eastern Mediterranean, secure affordable sources of cotton and silk, and curb the spread of Arab nationalism to its North African empire (Shambrook, 1998). British involvement, on the other hand, was equally significant. The dual strategy during World War I, aimed at both undermining Ottoman influence and establishing a counterweight to French dominance in the Middle East, an approach that encompassed complex alliances and strategic promises to Arab tribes, emphasizing the complicated relation of local ambitions and foreign interests in the region's journey towards independence (Yakoubi, 2022). The British agenda included making strategic promises to Sharif Hussein of Hejaz, for instance — Britain's focus in the Middle East was especially placed on protecting the route to India, ensuring access to affordable oil for its navy, preserving its strategic position in the Mediterranean, and safeguarding its economic interests (Shambrook, 1998).

A defining moment in this historical context was the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. In 1916, marking the beginning of numerous accords shaping the post-Ottoman Levant, British diplomat Mark Sykes and French diplomat Francois Georges-Picot reached an agreement. A secret pact made between British and French political forces, to weave together the threads of diplomatic strategies, geopolitical maneuvering, and the aspirations of local communities. This agreement

⁵ Christian group in Lebanon affiliated with the Maronite Church, which has the largest population in the country.

delineated post-Ottoman zones of influence in the Middle East, profoundly impacting the geopolitical and socio-economic landscape. Ottaway (2015) claimed that, the primary concern addressed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement was not the question of whether these regions would be subjected to foreign oversight—since that outcome was already predetermined—but rather, it delineated the specific territories to be administered by France and Britain, with Britain securing total control over "Mesopotamia" from north of Baghdad through Basra down to the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and France obtaining full authority over the lands spanning from Haifa up the Mediterranean shoreline to the southern regions of Turkey and reaching into Anatolia. The arbitrary divisions implemented by this agreement overtly disregarded the intrinsic connections within communities, leading to long-standing tensions and divisions (Ottaway, 2015; Pierret, 2019; Mansfield, 2019). The agreement reads as follows:

“It is accordingly understood between the French and British governments:

That France and Great Britain are prepared to recognize and protect an independent Arab state or a confederation of Arab states (a) and (b) marked on the annexed map, under the suzerainty of an Arab chief. That in area (a) France, and in area (b) Great Britain, shall have priority of right of enterprise and local loans. That in area (a) France, and in area (b) Great Britain, shall alone supply advisers or foreign functionaries at the request of the Arab state or confederation of Arab states” (Sykes & Picot, 1916, p.).

The legacy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, however, transcends mere border delineation — to this day, it exerts a lasting impact on the political, economic, and social landscape of the Middle East (Ottaway, 2015). The dissension that was created fueled a sense of betrayal and resentment among local Arab populations, who had hoped for independence and self-determination in the post-Ottoman era (Ottaway, 2015; Pierret, 2019). The feelings of betrayal in the post-Agreement era set the stage for ongoing conflicts and subsequent power struggles in the region.

Nonetheless, it could be interpreted that the implementation of these principles frequently clashed with the desires of local populations, resulting in a disjunction between the externally imposed political frameworks and the region's inherent social and cultural fabric. The repercussions of Sykes-Picot disrupted long-standing connections and trade routes, isolating Damascus from neighboring territories like Lebanon, Palestine, and Transjordan (Ottaway, 2015;

Pierret, 2019). The arbitrary drawing of borders disregarded the organic and historical connections among communities, leading to enduring tensions and divisions and socio-political ramifications became increasingly evident (Pierret, 2019). The Euphrates tribes, for one, bound by kinship connections and linguistic similarities, found themselves arbitrarily divided from the lower Iraqi segment of the valley, perpetuating enduring tensions and divisions (Pierret, 2019). President Woodrow Wilson, in his address to Congress on April 2, 1917, justified the US's entry into World War I by expressing the need to "make the world safe for democracy" (Woodrow Wilson, 1917). The United States entered the war against Germany following the Congress's approval of President Woodrow Wilson's declaration of war on April 6, 1917. On January 8, 1918, Woodrow Wilson presented his Fourteen Points. These points outlined his vision for postwar reconstruction, emphasizing the conduct of 'foreign policy, freedom of the seas, free trade', and the principle of national 'self-determination' through the disassembly of European empires and the rise of new states (Woodrow Wilson, 1918).

2.2 Divide and Rule, The French Mandate and the Path to Great Syrian Revolt

Towards the end of World War I In September 1918, Bulgaria surrendered, followed by the Ottoman Empire in October and subsequently Austria-Hungary and Germany in November, effectively marking the end of World War I. The conflict, which spanned from 1914 to 1918, was concluded with the victory of the Allied Powers, comprising the UK, France, Italy, Russia, and the US, which joined the war later. After the struggling Ottoman army evacuated Damascus, British and Arab forces entered the city on October 1, 1918. The Ottoman Empire, which had been the most powerful Muslim force in that region for many centuries, and one that had provided some protection against European rule to most Arab countries, was officially defeated and dismantled (Shambrook, 1998). The cessation of hostilities was formalized through a series of armistices. These armistices included the Armistice of Salonica with Bulgaria, the Armistice of Villa Giusti with Austria-Hungary, the Armistice of Compiègne with Germany and the Armistice of Mudros with the Ottoman Empire.

The post-World War I period was marked by pivotal conferences that significantly influenced the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, particularly in the context of Syrian independence. Post-World War I developments, including the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and

the Treaty of Versailles, further shaped the Syrian geopolitical landscape under the guise of external European powers. In this context, the British and French found space to maintain their colonial empires and strengthen their military presence in the Middle East and the Maghreb (Shambrook, 1998). Furthermore, The Paris Peace Conference, was organized to determine peace conditions after World War I, with the representatives of the UK, France, the US, and Italy, prominently recognized as the “Big Four”⁶, among nearly thirty participating nations. In this regard, during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 American President Wilson highlighted Arab demands for independence, advocating for Faysal to justify his governance (Reilly, 2018).

Despite Faysal's efforts to argue for Syrian independence at the conference, he was met with limited support and subsequently returned to Syria, his aspirations unfulfilled. This lack of support can be largely attributed to the conflicting interests of the newly established major powers — England and France — who were not in agreement with Syrian independence due to its opposition with their strategic objectives in the region (Demirel, 2019). Despite Arab aspirations for independence, England and France’s conflicting interests led to the establishment of the “Mandate system”, a compromising framework that blended imperial ambitions with new international norms of governance (Shambrook, 1998; Mansfield, 2019). An agreement was reached between Britain and France's strategic geopolitical interests: according to Article 22 of the Covenant of the Leagues of Nations, the Mandate principle set out that a more advanced state was tasked with guiding a less advanced state in democratic self-government until it had the infrastructural capacity to govern independently:

“1. To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant;

2. The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or

⁶ The Big Four refers to the key leaders at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference after World War I. They included U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, UK Prime Minister David Lloyd George, French Premier Georges Clemenceau, and Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando.

their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League;

3. The character of the mandate must differ according to the stage of the development of the people, the geographical situation of the territory, its economic condition and other similar circumstances'' (League of Nations, 1919).

Following the war, Emir Faisal established the "Kingdom of Syria" in 1919. However, the military intervention by the French against Faisal led to the dissolution of this kingdom. While England and France were engaged in the struggle for the distribution In April 1920, the San Remo Conference was held to address the fate of the Middle East territories previously under Ottoman control. The cessation of British opposition to French objectives in Syria paved the path for both Allied nations to establish the conditions they would enforce on the vanquished Ottoman Empire (Fromkin, 1989). Under the terms agreed upon by the Allies in early 1920, the Arab regions of the Ottoman Empire were to be severed and allocated among the two European powers, with Britain retaining Palestine and Mesopotamia, ensuring Arabia's independence under British-influenced monarchs—following Britain's prior acquisition of Egypt and the Gulf coast—while France was to take control of Syria, including Lebanon, with all territories, namely Palestine (inclusive of Transjordan⁷), Syria (inclusive of Lebanon), and Iraq, ostensibly poised for eventual independence according to the League of Nations Mandates, despite France, in particular, viewing such independence promises more as superficial commitments and treating Syria and Lebanon with an annexationist approach (Fromkin, 1989).

The Supreme Council of the League of Nations declared, in April of 1920, that the Syrian map would be split into the two French mandates: Lebanon and Syria. The French mandate in Syria, in turn, introduced significant transformations. Firstly, France's strategy of division and bias towards certain sects deepened regional and sectarian divides. This period witnessed considerable resistance, especially illustrated with events such as the Great Revolt which spanned from 1925 to 1927 (Khoury, 1987). The partitioning of Greater Syria⁸ into distinct mandates under the

⁷ Transjordan, now known as the Kingdom of Jordan, was established as an emirate under British protection in 1921, became an autonomous territory in 1923, and gained full independence in 1946.

⁸ Greater Syria denotes a historical and geographic concept covering present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and portions of Turkey and Iraq, mirroring the extent of ancient empires and the Ottoman Empire's administrative regions before the redefinition of national boundaries in the 20th century.

stewardship of French and British authorities constituted a pivotal juncture in the historiography of the Middle East, and by extension, Syrian history. Following the allocation of the Syrian and Lebanese mandates, one of France's initial actions was the territorial expansion of Lebanon at the *expense* of Syrian lands (Mansfield, 2019). This division created artificial borders that hindered the movement of goods and people, and isolated Syria, significantly impacting its political and economic landscape (Khoury, 1987). The French, after “acquiring” their portion of the region, aimed to further subdivide it to weaken the Arab nationalist movement present therein (Khoury, 1987). Mansfield (2019) noted that this strategy was evident in the creation of Greater Lebanon in August 1920, a realization of Maronite aspirations. This new political entity encompassed not only Christian areas, but Muslim-majority regions too, as well as a mixed population in Beirut and the Beqaa Valley⁹ (Mansfield, 2019). The expansion of Lebanese territory was critical for the state’s territorial and economic feasibility, but it did little to enhance political stability. Instead, it entrenched Maronite reliance on French support, as Lebanese politics primarily revolved around sectarian negotiations for government representation. France, however, favoring Maronites and other Uniates, inadvertently led to the formation of an anti-French and anti-Maronite coalitions, among other sects (Khoury, 1987).

In Aleppo, residents found themselves cut off from their traditional trading partners in Turkey and Iraq, while those in Damascus experienced restricted trade due to controlled borders with Palestine, significantly altering their economic activities (Khoury, 1987). In Beirut, however, the situation spurred a different response; the emerging Muslim and Christian business class began to advocate for the concept of Greater Lebanon. This movement was driven by a desire to protect their economic interests amidst the changing geopolitical landscape, indicating a notable shift in local attitudes towards the new state configurations (Khoury, 1987). Contrastingly, the annexation of new territories to Lebanon was met with resistance from many of its inhabitants, who opposed the idea of living under a Maronite-dominated state and expressed desires to reunite with Syria (Khoury, 1987). Despite initial opposition, by the mid-1930s, Muslim leaders in Lebanon started to participate in political dialogues that would eventually define the principles of religious representation within the government. While public declarations favored unification with Syria, in reality, these leaders recognized their enhanced political influence within the smaller Lebanese

⁹ The Beqaa Valley, situated in eastern Lebanon, is a key agricultural heartland, also noted for its historical significance and viticulture, within the broader context of the Levantine region, including Syria.

framework. They utilized the prospect of reunification with Syria as a strategic tool in negotiations to secure a more advantageous position in Lebanese politics (Khoury, 1987).

In a notable address to the Imperial Conference in 1921, Winston Churchill, serving as the Colonial Secretary at the time, articulated significant reservations concerning French military endeavors in Syria. He underscored the critical importance of Anglo-French relations, suggesting that these ties rendered Britain fundamentally incapable of intervening in Arab matters (Mansfield, 2019). This stance underscores the complex interplay of colonial interests and diplomatic relationships that characterized the period. Despite Churchill's expressed unease, the overriding value placed on maintaining a unified front between Britain and France ultimately led to Britain's acquiescence in the face of French actions in Syria. The prioritization of Anglo-French solidarity deemed indispensable for broader strategic interests, effectively sidelined considerations related to Arab autonomy and affairs. Consequently, France was able to proceed with its military operations unimpeded, highlighting the extent to which geopolitical alliances trumped regional concerns in the calculus of imperial powers (Shambrook, 1998). This episode demonstrated the complex interactions within colonial power politics and the compromises made to keep alliances intact, often sacrificing the right to self-rule for colonized areas.

France formally assumed the Mandate for Lebanon and Syria, as granted by the League of Nations two years later, in July of 1922 (Shambrook, 1998). Beyond the League's capacity to overturn, on September 29, 1923, the French had already implemented *de facto* arrangements for defining boundaries and administrative structures (Shambrook, 1998). Following these events, a Syrian Federation was declared, unifying the states of Aleppo, Damascus, and Alawite¹⁰ (which was disbanded at the end of 1924 and succeeded by a Syrian state that included the former regions of Damascus and Aleppo and a separate Sanjaq of Alexandretta¹¹). France's push for Greater Lebanon significantly fueled anti-French sentiment among Syrian nationalists. As France pursued a 'divide-and-rule' strategy in the rest of Syria (Seale, 1988), splitting the region along ethnic and regional lines, it justified its emphasis on communal differences as a response to political realities and public wishes. Yet, this interpretation aligned conveniently with France's goals of weakening

¹⁰ In Syria, the Alawite sect is a minority religious group mainly found in the coastal areas of Latakia and Tartus, distinguished by their unique doctrines that originate from Shia Islam. The term "Alawi" is derived from "Ali," the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, held in high esteem by Alawites as Muhammad's legitimate successor.

¹¹ The Sanjak of Alexandretta, historically known as the Sanjak of İskenderun, was a territorial division within the Ottoman Empire located in the modern-day Hatay Province of Turkey.

pan-Syrian and Arab nationalist sentiments and consolidating their control by appealing to minority groups that favored French rule (Khoury, 1987). France forcefully suppressed minor uprisings, sent nationalist leaders into exile in order to pacify the nation.

Politically, French strategies to weaken Syrian nationalism, including the exclusion of nationalist leaders from significant roles and the maintenance of a restricted political landscape, led to internal conflicts and a severe power imbalance (Khoury, 1987). This period of resistance, fueled by a blend of local grievances and French administrative policies, culminated in widespread unrest and rebellion. Following the culmination of the Rif War¹², both France and Spain regained administrative control over Morocco without significant internal opposition (Rogan, 2009). The charismatic leadership of Abd el-Krim¹³ during the Rif War managed to capture the imaginations of nationalists throughout the Arab world as Syrians admired the Rifis, seen as Arab resisters of European colonialism, for their spirited defense of their land and faith (Rogan, 2009).

The rebellion began in the summer of 1925, with the Druze¹⁴ incited by local grievances and the assertive actions of General Sarrail, the third High Commissioner. By the summer of 1926, the situation escalated as Syrian nationalists, lacking external support for armed assistance, faced a formidable French military response. France had deployed 50,000 troops in Syria to quell the resistance, and by October 1926, the French Army was in the process of fully eradicating the remaining pockets of resistance, leading to the imprisonment or exile of nationalist leaders, the destruction of villages in the Jabal Druze, and having the city of Damascus surrounded by barbed wire (Fromkin, 1989). The conflict resulted in many casualties, including 6,000 rebels and 2,000 French troops, leaving circa 100,000 people unhoused (Shambrook, 1998). Despite France's attempts to label the rebels as bandits and common criminals, the country's global reputation was undoubtedly compromised (Shambrook, 1998). The resistance movement was not merely focused

¹² The Rif War, spanning from 1920 to 1926, involved combat between Berber tribes from Morocco's Rif mountainous area and Spanish colonial troops, who were later joined by French forces.

¹³ Abd el-Krim (1882–1963), a prominent Berber figure, spearheaded the Rif War from 1920 to 1926 against Spanish and later French forces in northern Morocco, employing pioneering guerrilla tactics that significantly tested European military approaches, ultimately leading to his capture and exile, yet his contributions continue to resonate within anti-colonial and North African independence movements.

¹⁴ The Druze constitute a unique ethnoreligious community predominantly found in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, characterized by their singular monotheistic faith, secretive rituals, and a deep sense of communal identity and solidarity.

on rebellion; many Syrian elites aimed to adjust the power balance with French authorities, rather than overthrow it completely (Khoury, 1987).

However, the 1925 Syrian Revolt failed to achieve independence from France, leading to a shift in the nationalist movement. Urban elites moved away from armed struggle, opting instead for negotiation and nonviolent protest (Rogan, 2009). After quelling the revolt, French policy began exhibiting a conservative but notable degree of flexibility, showing growing collaboration with certain nationalist factions (Shambrink, 1998). The paradoxical persistence of Syria's political elite and the extension of French rule were, in part, due to France's strategic failure to weaken the landowning class and develop new socio-political groups (Khoury, 1987).

All these events led to the formation of the National Bloc Party¹⁵ in 1928 as a product of the Syrian independence movement. It would not be incorrect to say that this was a political coalition established with the aim of independence, rather than a political party with a mere ideological basis. The National Bloc emerged as a prominent political group in Syria after the major uprising, during the latter part of French colonial rule (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009). Syrian nationalists embraced a policy referred to as "honourable cooperation", wherein they sought to advance the cause of national liberation through peaceful means and negotiation (Rogan, 2009, p. 301). In 1929, Syrian representatives crafted their own constitution, which was subsequently rejected by the French authorities (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009). The following year, France enforced its own constitution on Syria, ensuring their continued control and the ongoing safeguarding of French interests (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009). Over the span of six years, Syrian politicians officially held office and the legislative body was able to convene — notwithstanding, overriding French authority rendered their political efforts mostly fruitless (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009).

2.3 Syria at the Crossroads of World War II and Beyond: Syria's Struggle during World War II and its Aftermath

The April 1936 electoral triumph of the Popular Front, a coalition of left-wing parties achieving a majority in the French parliament for the first time, led to Léon Blum assuming the

¹⁵ The National Bloc in Syria was a prominent coalition of nationalist parties during the French Mandate, advocating for Syrian independence and leading the country's anti-colonial efforts until achieving sovereignty in 1946.

role of Prime Minister of France in June 1936. The election of Léon Blum's¹⁶ Popular Front in France in 1936 sparked optimism for better relations between France and Syria (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009). Presumably because Blum's leftist government was perceived as more sympathetic to the nationalist aspirations of colonized peoples. By the end of 1936, France and Syria had reached a preliminary agreement that was designed to establish an alliance between the two nations and support Syria's admission to the League of Nations (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009). This suggests an attempt by France to balance its imperial interests with a degree of political autonomy for Syria. However, this initial optimism was undermined when Blum's government fell in 1938, leading to the French parliament's subsequent refusal to ratify the treaty (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009). This, however, indicated the fragility of such diplomatic efforts in the face of domestic political changes in France.

Additionally, France's decision to hand over the Alexandretta area to Turkey generated an immense source of resentment amongst Syrians (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009), and action which was taken to secure Turkey's neutrality in the impending European conflict (Rogan, 2009). After the war, the province of Hatay (then known as the Sanjak of Alexandretta) was initially mandated to France under the Sykes-Picot Agreement and later officially became part of French Syria following the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. Following a series of negotiations and international engagements, the League of Nations in 1937 recognized the Hatay State as an autonomous region within Syria, albeit with substantial Turkish influence. This arrangement was intended as a provisional measure, as both the Turkish government and the inhabitants of Hatay advocated for a more definitive resolution. In 1939, a referendum was held, resulting in Hatay's decision to unite with Turkey. The transition of the province from French jurisdiction to Turkish sovereignty was achieved through a coordinated effort of diplomatic negotiations and was influenced by the geopolitical context of the era, particularly France's focus on the looming threat of World War II. These moves reflected France's prioritization of its strategic interests over its commitments to Syrian nationalists, exacerbating tensions. In response, enraged Syrian nationalists organized extensive rallies and protests, fueling a severe crackdown by part of the French (Rogan, 2009). In 1939, the French Chief Administrator abolished the Syrian constitution, dissolved its parliament,

¹⁶ Léon Blum (1872–1950), a prominent French socialist and the country's first Jewish prime minister, led the Popular Front government during the 1930s, enacting major social reforms and championing the rights of workers.

and restored the separate governance of the Alawite and Druze regions (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009).

In September 1939, Germany's invasion of Poland under the leadership of Hitler, Britain and France announced their state of war against Germany, thereby starting the series of events which will called the Second World War. However, the war quickly resulted in France's defeat. France capitulated within a span of six weeks. When the French Prime Minister of the time, Paul Reynaud, refused to sign an armistice, Marshal Philippe Pétain¹⁷ signed a ceasefire with the Nazis in June 1940. The collaborationist French regime, known as the Vichy Regime, was subsequently established in Philippe Pétain's leadership (Rogan, 2009). Consequently, Syria, which was already under French mandate, came under the occupation of Vichy France¹⁸. In the spring of 1941, heightened German interest in the Mediterranean, spurred by an Iraqi revolt, prompted Vichy regime to permit German use of Syrian air bases in exchange for verbal concessions, leading to the Protocols of Paris that formalized this arrangement and extended German access to French bases in Tunisia and Senegal for unspecified future concessions (Christofferson and Christofferson, 2006).

Under the new regime, with Syria and Lebanon placed under the jurisdiction of Vichy high commissioner General Henri Dentz, who, upon offering the use of Syrian air bases to Germany in May 1941, prompted Britain, driven by strategic concerns over Axis access to the Middle East, to swiftly intervene, joining forces with the Free French under Charles de Gaulle¹⁹, culminating in the occupation of Syria and Lebanon in the summer of 1941 in Syria-Lebanon campaign, also known as 'Operation Exporter' in order to eliminate the threat posed by Vichy French-controlled territories in Syria and Lebanon to UK's interests in the Middle East, involving a coalition of British, Commonwealth, and Free French ultimately securing the region from potential Axis exploitation and bolstering the Free French government's legitimacy. Churchill's approach and Britain's policy regarding Syria received widespread support as he was acknowledged for his

¹⁷ Philippe Pétain, celebrated as a World War I hero, subsequently governed Vichy France, cooperating with Nazi Germany throughout World War II.

¹⁸ Vichy France was the regime that governed southern France during World War II, from 1940 to 1944, collaborating with Nazi Germany and led by Marshal Philippe Pétain, known for its alignment with Nazi policies and persecution of Jews.

¹⁹ Charles de Gaulle, a prominent French general and political leader, spearheaded the resistance against Nazi Germany with the Free French Forces during World War II and established the Fifth Republic in 1958, becoming its inaugural President until 1969.

efforts to defend the Free World against Nazi Germany and for supporting de Gaulle, while also clarifying that Britain had no intention of taking over France's role in the Levant, yet he faced skepticism and allegations from a distrustful de Gaulle who repeatedly accused Britain of leveraging after misfortunes 1940 France's to push France out of the Middle East (Zamir, 2016).

Following this, Shukri al-Quwatli²⁰, who was exiled by the French in 1927 due to nationalist activities, returned to lead the National Bloc in Syria in 1942. Al-Quwatli's government, aiming for a gradual transition to independence, sought to negotiate with France (Rogan, 2009). An event that may be indicating a strategic approach to achieving full sovereignty. The group faced resistance, particularly regarding control over Syria's national army and internal security force — in a united front with the al-Khoury government in Lebanon, al-Quwatli's administration worked towards international support against French dominance (Rogan, 2009), signifying the importance of regional solidarity in their independence movements. Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle leveraged their countries' rivalry in the Levant, with Churchill using it to manage or penalise de Gaulle for jeopardizing British war efforts or straining relations with Roosevelt, and de Gaulle inciting crises in the Levant to protect the interests of Free France against British or American policies in North Africa or Europe while Syrian and Lebanese nationalists adeptly used this rivalry to achieve national sovereignty (Zamir, 2016).

The abrupt decision to militarily intervene in Syria and Lebanon significantly impacted UK's relationships with Free France and the Arab world, with the continuing to acknowledge France's interests while also offering support Syrian and Lebanese independence creating continuous tension throughout the conflict (Zamir, 2016). This era also saw significant anti-French demonstrations in Syria during the winters of 1944 and 1945, highlighting the growing discontent and push for independence. Facing a quickly worsening situation they couldn't handle due to insufficient military resources, the French used deadly force to suppress the government's leaders and force the people into obedience. When France announced it wouldn't give up command of the Syrian army until a deal was made with Syria's government, both Syria and Lebanon stopped any further talks (Rogan, 2009). The first focus of the French assault was directly on the Syrian government by disconnecting the electricity supply to Damascus, leaving the city in total darkness (Rogan, 2009).

²⁰ Shukri al-Quwatli, Syria's inaugural president post-independence, served from 1943 to 1949 and again from 1955 to 1958, championing Syrian nationalism, pan-Arab unity, and resistance against colonial and Zionist forces.

Anglo-American leaders heavily criticized France's military operations in Syria in May 1945, coinciding with the UN's (United Nations) San Francisco Conference (Dostal, 2015). This appeal provided Britain with a legitimate reason to involve itself in French imperial affairs and urged their wartime ally to halt the attack (Rogan, 2009). The British military, with approval from the US, intervened in Syria, further undermining French political authority. US President Roosevelt proposed the Middle East's division between the US and Britain, leaving France completely out of the agreement. The Four Policemen²¹ plan for global governance, as it was coined, included the US, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China, but notably excluded France in the post-war accords (Dostal, 2015), illustrating the diminished status of France as a global power. In July 1945, the French finally conceded defeat and agreed to transfer military control to the governments of Syria and Lebanon.

The international community, in turn, officially recognized Syria and Lebanon's independence when both nations became founding members of the UN on October 24, 1945, and were treated as equals to France, marking a significant shift in international relations and the recognition of sovereign rights. During the Second World War, France's dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean weakened considerably (Dostal, 2015). De Gaulle was unsuccessful in upholding French influence in the region, leading to the ultimate departure of French forces from Syria in April 1946; following the departure of French forces, Syria proclaimed its independence on April 17, 1946 (Dostal, 2015). Following its independence, Syrian President Quwatli actively eradicated French educational influence by instituting policies that favored the Arabic language, while simultaneously distancing Syria from the French monetary system, the country forged stronger connections with neighboring nations and welcomed American military training (Dostal, 2015). This can be interpreted policy shift that not only reflected a broader realignment of Syria's foreign policy but also demonstrated its strategic partnerships in the post-colonial era.

2.4 Navigating Sovereignty: External Powers and Internal Dynamics Post-1946

It can be stated that Syria, having emerged from the French mandate following World War II, was in a period of instability until the coup by Hafez Al-Assad in 1970. In the first decade

²¹ The "Four Policemen" concept proposed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II aimed for the United States, United Kingdom, Soviet Union, and China to jointly maintain global peace and order, laying the groundwork for the United Nations.

following the end of World War II, the political landscape of Syria witnessed 20 different governments and the adoption of four distinct constitutions. Seale (1997) explained this situation stating in the context of the post WWII era, Syrian independence in 1946 was marked by an incomplete decolonization process. The new nation grappled with domestic challenges, including coups and changes in government, as well as the broader question of its role in the Arab world and its stance on the emerging conflict in Palestine. Despite the withdrawal of French troops, the region remained significantly under Western influence, particularly that of Britain, which maintained a substantial presence in various Middle Eastern countries (Seale, 1997). This influence was exemplified by the end of the British Mandate for Palestine in 1948, which directly led to the formation of the State of Israel, a landmark event that reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the region.

Additionally, the Suez Crisis of 1956, involving Egypt, showed the strategic interests of Britain in maintaining control over key international waterways, even as it highlighted the limitations of British power in the face of international and regional opposition. In Transjordan, now Jordan, Britain's influence persisted beyond the 1946 end of its mandate, with a continued military presence and political leverage until a national revolution in 1958 sought to assert greater sovereignty. Furthermore, Britain's engagement in Iran, though not as a mandate, was driven by significant economic interests, particularly in the oil sector, highlighted by the significant role of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company²². The establishment of treaties and protectorate relationships with several states in the Persian Gulf, including Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE (United Arab Emirates), and Oman, further demonstrated Britain's strategic ambitions in the region. Notably, Britain's involvement in the establishment and defense of Kuwait, leading to its independence in 1961, marked a continuation of its efforts to shape the political and economic contours of the Middle East, even as the era of formal colonialism waned. This situation illustrates how superficial changes in political status often mask underlying continuities in external control. The perspectives of regional and international influence in the Middle East are not mutually exclusive; it is often posited that great powers exert control over the foreign policies of Middle Eastern states through regional allies (Halliday, 2005). Historically, nations such as Saudi Arabia, Iran before the revolution, and Kingdom of Jordan have been regarded as surrogate representatives of Western

²² The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, established to exploit Iran's oil reserves, became a key player in global oil dynamics and a catalyst for the 1953 coup in Iran, eventually transforming into today's BP (British Petroleum).

powers, whereas Syria, South Yemen, Iraq and Egypt have been perceived as allies aligned with the USSR. (Halliday, 2005). It can be interpreted that, all in all, this reflects a nuanced dynamic of power play in the region, where internal politics often intersect with global strategic interests.

Since achieving independence in 1946, Syria's position on the Palestine issue has fundamentally shaped its political ethos and international strategy. During the British Mandate of Palestine from 1922 to 1947, the territory saw significant Jewish immigration, especially from Eastern Europe and intensified by Nazi persecution in the 1930s, amidst Arab demands for independence and resistance to the immigration. This led to an ongoing violence from both sides, prompting the UK to seek solutions for granting independence to the violence-stricken land, while also incorporating the Balfour Declaration's support for a Jewish national home in Palestine (Shveitser, 2021). Following Britain's appeal for help, the UN formed the UNSCOP (United Nations Special Committee on Palestine) to examine the circumstances and recommend potential resolutions. UN Resolution 181, also known as the Partition Plan for Palestine, was adopted by the UNGA (United Nations General Assembly) on November 29, 1947. It recommended the partition of the British Mandate of Palestine into two independent states, one Arab and one Jewish, with Jerusalem being established as a corpus separatum, an international city administered by the UN to ensure access to religious sites (United Nations General Assembly, 1947). This led to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War following the end of the British Mandate in 1948. Following the proclamation of the State of Israel in May 1948, Syria, along with four other Arab countries, intervened in Palestine. The Syrian military engaged in operations in the north, targeting the regions of Galilee and the Golan Heights. Their objectives were to obstruct the formation of Israel and to aid the Palestinian Arab community (Ben-Ami, 2006). The conflict of 1948 significantly influenced Syria, leading to political unrest and molding its approach to international relations. Unquestionably, the immediate aftermath of the first Arab-Israeli war had a profound impact on neighboring states, particularly Syria (Halliday, 2005).

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Syria faced more instability due to foreign conflicts adding to its own internal problems, showing how local, regional, and global politics can all affect each other in complicated ways. During the first postwar decade, Syria was a central battleground in the struggle for regional dominance, yet it lacked agency in determining its own fate, often being treated as a pawn in the broader Arab and international political game (Seale, 1965). This reflects the broader geopolitical reality of the time, where regional actors were often overshadowed by the

interests and actions of more powerful states. According to Seale (1997), the strategic importance of Syria in the Middle East, believed to necessitate its control for regional dominance, led to the country facing significant external pressures and financial incentives. The political leanings of Syrian leaders, often influenced by their origins in Aleppo or Damascus, played a significant role in the country's oscillating alliances and determined the external alignments of the various military regimes (Seale, 1997). This period marked a significant shift in the political landscape of the region, setting a precedent for military interventions in politics.

The year of 1949 in Syria was notable for witnessing the first ever military coups in the Arab world, leading to a succession of military governments that lasted until 1954. Colonel Husni al-Za'im, serving as the Army Chief of Staff, orchestrated a coup d'état on March 30, 1949, generating widespread speculation about potential foreign support, a topic that remains debated among Syrian and international observers (Rathmell, 1995). Numerous instances demonstrate the direct intervention of external powers in the Middle East, notably the coups d'état with involvement from American or British intelligence agencies, such as the one in Syria in 1949: Halliday (2005) claims that the 1949 coups within Syria were orchestrated by the American CIA itself. Theories often implicate the US, though Britain and France have also been suggested as possible backers — Soviet commentators at the time emphasized the purported involvement of British and American interests in oil and strategy in the coup, however Rathmell (1995) notes that Britain seemed unprepared for Za'im's actions, and subsequently did not aggressively pursue any alleged interests that the coup might have served. Another theory posits French support for Za'im's coup, seemingly credible given the close ties that emerged between Za'im's administration and France, highlighted by Za'im's ratification of a monetary agreement with France on April 16 (Rathmell, 1995). However, there is no concrete evidence indicating that France actively encouraged Za'im's initial coup (Rathmell, 1995), an ambiguity in the historical record that points to the challenges in discerning the *de facto* motivations and actions of external powers in Syrian politics.

The tenure of al-Za'im proved to be brief, culminating in his overthrow and subsequent execution in August 1949 by a coup led by Sami al-Hinnawi²³. Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, in turn, commanding the First Brigade, led a successful coup against Za'im on August 14, 1949 (Rathmell, 1995). Sami al-Hinnawi was a colonel in the Syrian Army and a member of the SSNP (Syrian

²³ Sami al-Hinnawi was a key figure in the 1949 military coup in Syria, leading to the brief overthrow of President Shukri al-Quwatli and marking a period of military governance in the nation's volatile political history.

Social Nationalist Party). Although the coup had internal roots, it sparked conjectures about foreign participation (Rathmell, 1995). Communist rhetoric at the time blamed Britain, alleging that British interests in Middle Eastern oil prompted the removal of Za'im, who was perceived to favor US oil companies and French military interests (Rathmell, 1995). Despite regional acceptance of these theories, substantial evidence supporting these claims is lacking. With the National Party absent from the Syrian Assembly, opposition to unionists largely stemmed from factions within the Syrian military, driven by varied motives ranging from preserving Syria's republican constitution and independence to concerns over diminishing military influence and enticements from Saudi Arabia (Rathmell, 1995). French influence was also scrutinized in the search for external involvement in Syrian affairs, and the British Foreign Office accepted the French Foreign Ministry's firm denial of involvement, with the latter expressing disapproval of Egyptian and Saudi interventions that threatened regional stability (Rathmell, 1995).

A key aspect of this period was the rivalry for Arab leadership between the Hashemites of Amman and Baghdad and Egypt (supported by Saudi Arabia), with each camp seeking to establish its version of Arab unity (Teitelbaum, 2019). In December 1949, Colonel Adib Shishakli's coup, the third in Syria for that year, targeting the government for its alleged favoritism towards Iraq and resulting in Sami al-Hinnawi's arrest, alongside his previous involvement in the March coup led by Husni al-Za'im against President Shukri al-Quwatli, significantly bolstered his dominance in Syrian politics, marking a critical shift in the country's political direction. Shishakli's manoeuvre did not constitute a traditional coup d'état, as the State's Head remained in office and the government formation process persisted (Rathmell, 1995). According to Rathmell (1995), Shishakli's maneuver, which did not constitute a traditional coup d'état since the State's Head remained in office and the government formation process continued, garnered initial support from Western powers, particularly the U.S. and France—with France actively enhancing the Syrian military's political role due to close ties—suggesting that Shishakli likely recognized and possibly found encouragement in the prospect of favorable views from the US towards his actions.

In the context of tracing European influence within the political history of Syria, it is pertinent to consider the shifting global balances following World War II. The post-war reconfiguration of the world order, marked by the transition of the concept of superpower from the 'Old Europe' of Britain and France to the two colossi of the East and West, namely the USSR and the US, had a significant impact on the political history of Syria. The early 1950s also saw the

onset of Cold War tensions impacting Syria. Concerned with containing Soviet influence and securing oil resources for European reconstruction, Western powers, particularly the US and Britain, focused on establishing a strategic bulwark in the Middle East against potential communist expansion (Seale, 1997). This strategy was epitomized by the Tripartite Declaration ²⁴ by the U.S., UK, and France in May 1951, aiming to reduce regional tensions.

Syria, a small nation besieged by extensive regional and international pressures, perceived the Soviet Union as a formidable ally and protector in this context (Seale, 1997). Western powers, energized by the Korean War, were focused on forming military alliances to contain the spread of communism, with a particular emphasis on establishing stable, pro-Western governments in the Middle East (Rathmell, 1995). The West's focus on protecting the region from communism, perceived by regional nationalists as a continuation of colonialism, along with the Western impatience towards Arab frustrations, exacerbated resentment and led to a significant rift and misunderstanding with Arab nationalist movements, profoundly impacting Syria's domestic and foreign policies for decades (Seale, 1997). This highlights how local political movements in the region were intertwined with the larger Cold War scenario, demonstrating the complexity of international interactions in the Middle East during this unstable era. However, during the initial stage of the global confrontation, spanning from 1946 to 1955, the USSR lacked the intention and capability to significantly challenge Western influence in the Arab world (Halliday, 2005).

If the focus is shifted from the spiral of international relations and struggle to the domestic affairs of Syria, exercising blatant dictatorial control, Adib Shishakli tightened his grip over Syria's civil service and courts, legislating by decree and abolishing all political parties on April 6, 1952, to create the ALM (Arab Liberation Movement), which filled the political vacuum; following a July 1953 referendum that established Syria as a presidential republic with Shishakli at its helm and a Chamber of Deputies dominated by ALM deputies after a boycott by other parties, the end of 1953 saw the emergence of signs foretelling Shishakli's regime's collapse, including student strikes, the spread of pamphlets urging sedition, a consensus among major political parties in Homs to resist and overthrow him, unrest among the Druzes leading to a declaration of martial law, and ultimately, On February 25, 1954, the military, penetrated by adversaries of Shishakli, carried out Syria's fourth coup, thus reinstating the government that had been toppled in 1949 (Collelo, 1987).

²⁴ The 1950 Tripartite Declaration by the US, UK, and France aimed to stabilize the Middle East by overseeing arms sales to ensure no country gained a military edge, fostering peace and deterring changes in the regional power balance.

Post-Shishakli, there was a notable shift in Western strategies towards Syria. Initially characterized by indecision, Western engagement became more aggressive (Dostal, 2015). The fall of Shishakli and subsequent elections marked a crucial turning point in Syria's role in global power dynamics. As a result it could be stated that the radical pan-Arab Ba'ath Party gained considerable influence during this period. A significant development was the election of communist Khalid Baqdash²⁵ to the Syrian parliament, marking a historic moment in the country's political landscape. These developments compelled Western powers to reassess their strategies in the region. As Dostal (2015) points out, the West, already divided over issues such as their stance on Nasser, Israel, and communism, intensified their interventions in Syrian affairs. Syria emerged as a crucial battleground in the larger context of preserving Western influence against the tide of rising Arab nationalism spearheaded by Nasser²⁶. Around 1954 and 1955, Western powers began to recognize the potential impact of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's ascendancy on Arab politics, prompting a reevaluation of their approach in the region (Dostal, 2015). The Western narrative of countering communism in the Middle East did not align with the primary concerns of Arab nations, which were more focused on containing Israel (Seale, 1997).

Rathmell (1995) further elucidates that the Soviet Union, in its post-Stalin era, recognized the strategic importance of the Middle East in the context of superpower rivalry. By offering arms sales, the Soviet Union successfully drew nations like Egypt and Syria into its sphere of influence. From 1954 to 1958, Syria experienced major political changes that significantly affected the Middle East's political scene and that laid the groundwork for future developments in the country and the region. This period marked the strengthening of Syrian-Soviet relations, an alliance that reached its zenith with Syria's union with Egypt in 1958. According to Seale (1997), this development substantially undermined Western influence in the region, allowing the Soviet Union to infiltrate what had been a staunchly Western-dominated sphere. The Soviet strategy in the Middle East, as Seale (1997) notes, was distinct from that of the West. Rather than imposing communism, Moscow aimed to capitalise on the prevalent neutralist, nationalist, and anti-Western

²⁵ Khalid Bakdash, born in 1912 and the first secretary of the Syrian Communist Party, transformed it into a key political player in Syria, championing social justice, land reform, and workers' rights, and adeptly managed Cold War era politics until his passing in 1995.

²⁶ Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970), a pivotal Egyptian statesman and Egypt's president from 1954 to his death, played a central role in the 1952 coup that ousted the monarchy. Renowned for advocating Arab nationalism and socialism, he notably nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, a landmark event in the region's decolonization era. Nasser's tenure deeply influenced Middle Eastern politics during the 20th century.

sentiments in Arab nations. This approach proved effective in aligning with Arab perspectives, particularly in contrast to Western tactics.

Both Syria and the Soviet Union were driven by security objectives: Syria sought protection against regional aggressors, past colonizers, and Israel, while the Soviet Union aimed to establish a strategic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean to counter American threats, particularly concerning their vulnerable Black Sea ports (Seale, 1997). Despite their differing motivations, Syria and the Soviet Union shared a common goal of reducing Western influence and military presence in the Middle East. Moreover, Nasser's growing influence was increasingly seen as a threat to Western hegemony in the Middle East (Dostal, 2015). This perception stemmed from the realization that Nasser's policies could significantly alter the regional balance of power, challenging Western interests. Consequently, there was a transition from a relatively passive Western approach to active efforts aimed at destabilizing the Syrian government between 1956 and 1957. These efforts included multiple Western-backed coup attempts and schemes involving Arab proxies and Turkey, reflecting the changing strategic landscape of the region (Dostal, 2015). The rise of Nasserism in the 1950s played a pivotal role in the inter-Arab struggle for control over Syria, significantly influencing the region's political landscape (Rathmell, 1995). During this period, the Cold War tensions were escalating, with the Great Powers deeply involved. The US and Britain, continuing their efforts to contain the Soviet Union, formed the Baghdad Pact, a crucial element in their regional defense strategy (Rathmell, 1995).

2.5 Baghdad Pact and its Aftermath

The years 1954 to 1958 in Syria, marked by considerable turmoil, saw the significant development of Syrian-Soviet relations, culminating in Syria's union with Egypt in 1958. This shift weakened the West's influence in the region and allowed the Soviet Union to penetrate a previously Western-dominated sphere (Seale, 1997). Key events during this time included the controversy over the Baghdad Pact in 1955, the Suez Crisis in 1956, political turmoil in Syria in 1957, and the formation of the UAR (United Arab Republic) in 1958. The Baghdad Pact came into existence on February 24, 1955, following its official signing in Baghdad, Iraq. Originally, the alliance consisted of Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the UK as founding members. Although the United States was not an official member, it backed the pact and was actively involved in its military

committees and operations. The Baghdad Pact was not only a military strategy against potential Soviet encroachment, but also a political maneuver. Iraqi statesman Nuri al-Said, with British support, aimed to transfer Arab leadership from Nasser's Egypt to Iraq and to preserve Britain's regional influence after losing the Suez Canal Zone base in 1954 (Seale, 1997). Syria's crucial position meant its potential membership in the pact could have influenced other Arab states to join, fulfilling Nuri al-Said's²⁷ aspirations for regional leadership. However, Syria opted against joining the pact (Seale, 1997). In response to an Israeli raid on Gaza in February 1955, Syria, instead of distancing itself from Egypt, further aligned with it, resulting in a Syrian-Egyptian military alliance in the spring of 1955. This alliance marked a strategic shift in the regional power balance (Seale, 1997). Notably, prior to Nasser's landmark Czech arms deal in 1955, Syria had already engaged in an arms transaction with Czechoslovakia in 1954, acquiring second-hand tanks, marking an early Soviet arms transfer to Arab nations (Seale, 1997).

The Suez Crisis of 1956 played a significant role in amplifying pro-Nasser and pro-Soviet sentiments in Syria. The crisis emerged as a result of Egypt's decision, led by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, to nationalize the Suez Canal, which was formerly under the control of British and French entities. This move jeopardized the interests of both the UK and France, given the canal's crucial role as a maritime passage for oil and various trades from the Middle East to Europe. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's resistance against the combined forces of Britain, France, and Israel during the crisis greatly enhanced his standing among the Syrian populace. Egyptian President Nasser, in a bold move, demanded the withdrawal of UN forces from the border with Israel and blocked Israeli access to the Straits of Tiran (Halliday, 2005). In response, Israel launched a surprise attack on swiftly crippling the Egyptian air force (Halliday, 2005). Israeli forces quickly moved into Sinai and approached the Suez Canal, while Syria lost territory in the Golan Heights (Halliday, 2005). Following this war, Israel emerged stronger, with significant support from Western countries and public opinion (Halliday, 2005). Concurrently, admiration for the Soviet Union in Syria increased markedly (Seale, 1997). The growing pro-Soviet leanings in Syria alarmed Britain, the United States, and Iraq, leading them to conspire to overthrow the Syrian government in 1956. This plot, linked to the wider Suez campaign against Egypt, was ultimately exposed, further exacerbating resentment within Syria (Seale, 1997).

²⁷ Nuri al-Said (1888–1958), a leading Iraqi statesman and repeatedly Prime Minister, known for his pro-Western stance and modernization efforts, faced opposition for his authoritarian governance and resistance to Arab nationalism, culminating in his ouster and death in the 1958 revolution that ended the Hashemite monarchy.

During this period, Syrian interactions with the Soviet bloc expanded across multiple sectors, including trade, aid, exchange visits, scholarships, and development loans. The frequency and diversity of these engagements reached a point where they became commonplace (Seale, 1997). Notably, it was the transfer of arms that most significantly strengthened the Syrian-Soviet relationship (Seale, 1997). By the summer of 1957, Western fears of a communist takeover in Syria had intensified. In response, London, and Washington, with support from Turkey, developed new strategies aimed at undermining the government in Damascus. The US grew increasingly convinced that Syria was on the brink of becoming a Soviet satellite, thereby escalating the geopolitical tensions in the region (Seale, 1997). In response to the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, which enabled the US to intervene in conflicts in the Near East and support regional allies like King Husayn of Jordan, while also conspiring with Turkey to destabilize the Syrian government (Yapp, 1996).

Syria's military elite, many of whom were adherents of Baathist ideology, experienced a profound sense of crisis (Seale, 1965). Alarmed by the prospect of being undermined by Western influences or communist adversaries, they sought solace in Nasser's Egypt, hastily forming a union in February 1958, a decision lacking thorough deliberation (Seale, 1965). The UAR was officially formed on February 1, 1958, with the merger of Egypt, led by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Syria. This union was viewed as a substantial threat by Britain and regional nations such as Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as it appeared to extend Nasser's influence and resources (Rathmell, 1995). The intention behind the UAR was for it to be the initial step towards a broader union of Arab states. Governed centrally from Cairo with President Gamal Abdel Nasser at the helm, the UAR experienced significant dominance of Egyptian policies and institutions. It could be interpreted that this predominance of Egypt in the union's affairs subsequently resulted in dissatisfaction among Syrians. Amidst this turmoil, a group of five young Baath party members, who also served as army officers, including the youthful Hafez al-Assad, formed a secret committee within the Syrian military. Their aim was to embody the Baath party's vision for Syria and create a united Arab world, aspiring to achieve what Nasser could not (Curtis, 2011). In this regard after yet another coup Syria declared itself independent. Thus, the UAR was dissolved.

2.6 Post United Arab Republic: The Years of Instability

Reflecting its politically turbulent pre-1958 landscape, Syria experienced a period of instability between 1961 and 1963, characterized by shaky governments and constant military coup threats, highlighted in early 1962 by two significant coup attempts led by Naji al-Nawawi and officers from Homs and Aleppo against the Damascus-centric power structure, culminating in the critical coup of 8th March 1963, triggered by a governmental crisis following resignations in protest of the dismissal of 30 teachers, an action that angered the Muslim Brotherhood faction, while the Baathist coup in Iraq on 8th February 1963 served both as an inspiration and a catalyst for these events (Yapp, 1996). The coup on 8 March 1963 led to the establishment of the NCRC (National Council of the Revolutionary Command), comprising both military and civilian officials who consolidated executive and legislative powers, with the operation orchestrated by Ba'ath Party leaders Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar²⁸. The Ba'ath regime, which came to power in 1963, significantly transformed the state it inherited, making it more robust and independent (Hinnebusch, 2001). The establishment of governance structures solidified authority and ingrained a tendency towards state-driven solutions, skepticism towards private investment, and an enduring populist sentiment (Hinnebusch, 2001). However, the ultimate result of the regime's endeavors diverged from the revolutionary state its founders had apparently envisioned (Hinnebusch, 2001). During this time, there was a notable shift in power from the Sunni majority to minorities that do not adhere to Sunni Islam, particularly the 'Alawis, Druzes, and Isma'ilis²⁹, with the 'Alawis eventually dominating the Syrian public sphere by 1970 (Yapp, 1996). The decline of Sunni dominance in military and political spheres post-1963 was exemplified by the rise of Major General Amin al Hafez, who is Sunni Ba'thist officer, who became a central figure in Syrian politics after quelling a Nasirite-officers-led coup in July 1963 (Yapp, 1996). In early 1966, the Ba'ath Party's National Command was ousted by a faction of radical left military opponents within the party, spearheaded by General Salah Jadid.

In the time preceding the 1967 conflict, the Syrian military and political spheres were destabilized by purges linked to actual and attempted coups, resulting in an inexperienced military leadership and pervasive mistrust between army ranks (Lesch, 2012). Another issue within the

²⁸ Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, both Syrian intellectuals and activists, founded the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in the 1940s, advocating for Arab unity, socialism, and secularism to combat colonialism and Zionism, and to foster a socialist Arab world.

²⁹ The Ismailis, a sect within Shia Islam, follow Ismail ibn Jafar as the legitimate successor to the sixth Imam and are known for their distinct theological views and divisions into Nizari and Musta'li branches, with the Aga Khan as their current spiritual leader, emphasizing social progress and education.

Ba'ath was that post-power acquisition, a rift emerged between younger, rural, military Ba'athists and their older, urban, civilian counterparts (Lesch, 2012). This intra-party divide evolved into a struggle between minority groups like the Alawites and Druze, who disproportionately dominated the military officer ranks, and the majority Sunni Ba'athists, who, despite forming 75% of Syria's population, were underrepresented in the military leadership (Lesch, 2012). The Ba'th Party's efforts to widen its influence in 1964-65 through the establishment of trade and peasants' unions marked a strategic expansion of its support base (Yapp, 1996). The internal power dynamics within the Ba'th Party culminated in the coup of 23rd February 1966, a decisive event that marked the victory of the military Ba'thist 'Alawis over their rivals within the party (Yapp, 1996). The rivalry between Jadid and Asad, which was as much about personal ambition as it was about policy differences, played a critical role in this power struggle. Jadid's advocacy for radical domestic policies and a war of liberation for Palestine contrasted sharply with Asad's more moderate approach and his focus on building a coalition of Arab states (Yapp, 1996). This ideological and strategic divergence ultimately led to a decisive confrontation in November 1970, resulting in Asad's victory and establishing his dominant position inside the party and the Syrian military (Yapp, 1996).

3 Syria Becoming an Active Actor in the Regional and International Scene: Wars and Major Events in the Lens of Europe-Syria Relations

3.1 Early years of Baath Efforts of Maintaining Stability in Syria: Arab-Israeli Wars and European Perceptions

The Ba'ath Party, formally known as the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, was established in Syria in the early 1940s. It emerged as a pan-Arabist movement advocating for Arab unity and freedom from colonial rule. In its early years, the Ba'ath Party struggled to gain a foothold in Syrian politics, which was dominated by other nationalist and ideological groups. However, the party slowly built up its presence, particularly in the Syrian military and among intellectuals. The party's significant turning point came in 1954 when it gained a considerable number of seats in the Syrian Parliament. The Ba'ath Party's real ascent to power occurred in 1963 when a successful coup, known as the 8th of March Revolution, brought the military-backed faction of the Ba'ath Party to

power in Syria. The transformation of Syria under the Ba'ath Party, as highlighted by Lesch (2012) and Hinnebusch (2001), was not only about internal state-building and resistance to perceived Western imperialism but also deeply intertwined with complex internal dynamics. The regime's focus on creating a robust, independent state with a centralized authority was overshadowed by internal strife and ideological divides. During the era preceding the 1967 war, the Syrian military and political spheres were destabilized by purges linked to actual and attempted coups, resulting in an inexperienced military leadership and pervasive mistrust between army ranks (Lesch, 2012). Additionally, a rift emerged within the Ba'ath party post-power acquisition, between younger, rural, military Baathists and their older, urban, civilian counterparts. This intra-party divide evolved into a struggle between minority groups like the Alawites and Druze, who disproportionately dominated the military officer ranks, and the majority Sunni Ba'athists, who, despite forming 75% of Syria's population, were underrepresented in the military leadership (Lesch, 2012).

Internal divisions within the party led to a power struggle between the military and civilian wings. Salah Jadid, representing the more radical, socialist wing of the party and his supporters, primarily from the military, ousted the government of President Amin al-Hafiz. The rise of Salah Jadid's in 1966 marked the arrival of Syria's most left-leaning government, characterized by an increase in radicalism (Ma'oz, 2022). Jadid's leadership saw collaboration with the Syrian Communist Party, as members were integrated into the government, and expanded ties with the Soviet Union (Ro'i, 1976). This alignment with the USSR led to significant Soviet support, both militarily and economically, including key projects. The Ba'ath Party, adhering to the motto "freedom, unity, and socialism," emphasized Arab unity as a response to European imperialism and Cold War geopolitics, however, 'Unity' in this context referred to Arab unity, considered crucial to counter European colonialism and, following the second World War, the interference of superpowers during the Cold War (Lesch, 2012, p. 78).

The Syrian-Soviet relationship, though lacking formal institutional ties, was marked by notable Syrian caution towards domestic communism (Seale, 1965). This caution stemmed from an understanding of the conflicting natures of Marxist internationalism and Arab nationalism (Seale, 1965). Despite their radical stance, Jadid's Ba'athists maintained a cautious approach towards communism, prioritizing their autonomous rule and ensuring that their brand of 'leftism' was primarily domestic in origin, rather than being heavily influenced by Algerian, Chinese, or

Soviet ideologies (Seale, 1997). Additionally, the Syrian Ba'th Party decided to emulate the organizational and institutional structures of the East European People's Democracies for its socialist initiatives (Ro'i, 1976).

From a European perspective, this rapprochement with the USSR can also be attributed to historical ties with major European powers. The Soviet Union's involvement in the Arab world, notably lacking economic or naval ambitions in the region, was primarily a strategic counter to Western influence (Eisenstadt and Pollack, 2001; Yapp, 1995). This geopolitical maneuvering was bolstered by the USSR's lack of a colonial past, making it an attractive ally to Arab states burdened with the legacies of British and French colonialism (Eisenstadt and Pollack, 2001). Both parties pursued an anti-status quo agenda, with the Soviet Union supporting Arab conflicts against Israel and conservative Arab monarchies (Eisenstadt and Pollack, 2001). On the other hand, as Eisenstadt and Pollack (2001) stated, the Soviet willingness to supply arms, even those not available to their own allies, took on a key role designing the regional balance of power. This alignment was not just a strategic counterbalance to Western influence, but also a reflection of shared opposition to Western imperialism and a mutual interest in reshaping the regional power dynamics, especially in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Therefore, the relationship between Syria and the Soviet Union, while careful and deliberate, emerged as a key factor in the larger landscape of Middle East politics and the Arab effort to resist what was seen as foreign control.

When examining this period, it should not be forgotten that Syria, recently emerging from being Europe's playground, had yet to overcome internal and external turmoil up to this point in history. The government that arose in February inherited a complex and multifaceted conflict with Israel, which manifested in several contentious issues. One major aspect was the ongoing dispute over farming rights in the demilitarized zones along the Israel-Syria border, which had been established following the 1949 armistice agreements. Another significant point of contention arose from Israel's initiative to divert water from the headwaters of the Jordan River. In response, the Arab League endorsed a Syrian plan to divert tributaries from the Golan Heights into the Jordan River, further escalating tensions between the two nations. Additionally, Syrian support for Palestinian guerrilla activities, which often involved incursions into Israeli territory, served to heighten these tensions even further. This backdrop of conflict and confrontation with Israel set the stage for the new Syrian regime's foreign policy and military strategies in the region. To establish its nationalistic credentials, the Jadid government actively supported Palestinian militants

engaged in hostilities against Israel and endeavored to persuade Nasser to adopt a more aggressive stance towards Israel (Pierret, 2019). Thus, these issues fueled tensions both at the Syrian Israeli and inter-Arab levels. However, the Ba'athist regime's low-intensity conflict tactics against Israel were not designed for a full-scale war, revealing Syria's unpreparedness for such a conflict (Lesch, 2012).

Although the political history of Syria is under scrutiny, as previously mentioned, in the context of the 1967 war, it is crucial to acknowledge not only Syria's independent internal and external dynamics but also the influences of regional dynamics and the Cold War equation. The situation took a dramatic turn when the Soviet Union intervened on 13 May, alerting Egypt to an alleged imminent Israeli assault on Syria (Bowen, 2017). This warning prompted Egypt's Field Marshal Amer to prepare the Egyptian army for potential conflict (Bowen, 2017). Consequently, the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict escalated regional tensions into a global issue, involving major powers and complicating efforts to resolve the dispute. Syria's involvement in the war, however, revealed its military unpreparedness, particularly evident when Israeli air strikes decimated the Syrian Air Force, forcing a retreat (Bowen, 2017; Lesch, 2012; Yapp, 1996). Initially, the Israeli military, preoccupied with the Syrian threat, exercised restraint towards Egypt (Bowen, 2017). Israel's military strategy, known as 'Operation Focus', was based on a preemptive strike aimed at disabling Arab air forces, starting with Egypt's (Bowen, 2017). False reports of victories against the Israeli army and claims of Egyptian artillery nearing Tel Aviv influenced Syria's hesitant involvement in the war. Despite its leadership's cautious approach, Syria began capturing Northern Israel. Soviets supported Syria in conflicts against Israel, significantly influencing the regional balance of power. However, once the the Israeli Air Force successfully concluded its operation in Egypt, it unexpectedly returned to decimate the Syrian Air Force, later, Israeli air raids obliterated almost 70% of the Syrian Air Force, compelling the surviving Syrian units to withdraw to remote airfields without participating in combat (Bowen, 2017).

UNSC (United Nations Security Council) adopted Resolution 242 on November 22, 1967, in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, including its implications for Syria and its relevance in European diplomatic efforts. The resolution read as following:

“(i) Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;

(ii) Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force'' (United Nations Security Council, 1967).

At the European side, in the initial stages of the escalating crisis, the British government, under the shadow of its declining imperial influence, contemplated a military response to avert a pre-emptive strike by Israel and to prevent a potential crisis within the United Nations due to escalating Middle Eastern tensions (Louis, 2012). However, the rapid progression of the conflict caught the British authorities unprepared too, and during the conflict, Arab nations erroneously accused them of collaborating with Israel, a claim that was unfounded (Louis, 2012). These accusations demonstrate the complex perceptions of British involvement in the region and its lingering colonial legacy. France, on the other hand, underwent a notable shift in its foreign policy. Led by Charles de Gaulle, navigated the Middle East's complex political environment with a stance of neutrality in the Israeli-Arab conflict, emphasizing the complete enforcement of UN conflict resolutions (Filiu, 2012). France's efforts to repair strained relations with Arab countries, including Syria, due to the Suez Crisis and the Algerian War, further characterized its diplomatic strategy during this time - after initially supporting Israel militarily, France adopted a stance of caution and impartiality during the 1967 war (Filiu, 2012). Despite these efforts, France was not able to prevent the onset of the war.

The war's aftermath led to extensive military and political changes. In a sense it was a wakeup call that pushed Syria to enhance military capabilities for national unity and integrity (Fitzgerald, 1982). Beyond the immediate consequences of this severe defeat, it can also be argued that it was one of the key factors in Hafez al-Assad's eventual consolidation of power, a regime that can be described as Syria's enduring dynasty up to the present day. Despite holding the rank of captain in the late 1950s, Hafez was a key figure in the secret Syrian military committee in Egypt, which included high-ranking officers from different ethnic backgrounds like the Alawites, Druze, and Sunnis that later became instrumental in the Ba'th putsch in March 1963 (Ma'oz, 2022). Assad rapidly advanced with being a major general and later to Field Marshal in 1968 (Ma'oz, 2022). Hafez also implicated Jadid in the military debacle of September 1970 during the Jordanian civil war (Ma'oz, 2022). Black September, often referred to as the Jordanian Civil War, was a

confrontation in September 1970 between King Hussein's Jordanian Armed Forces and Yasser Arafat's PLO in Jordan. Sparked by the PLO's attacks from Jordanian soil against Israel and subsequent Israeli retaliation, the conflict escalated, causing substantial casualties and leading to a forceful suppression of Palestinian militants in Jordan. This episode drastically shifted the region's political dynamics, resulting in the PLO's relocation from Jordan to Lebanon.

Post-1970 coup, Assad's military partnership became instrumental in developing an effective military force. Shortly after, he assumed the role of Syria's prime minister. By March 12, 1971, he was officially confirmed as president through a public referendum, securing 99.2% of the votes (Ma'oz, 2022). His narrative, postcolonial and anti-European, justified his coup, involving aggressive measures against perceived threats (Nacrou and Ghor, 2022). The military's role in politics, originating from its integration with the Ba'th Party, became more pronounced as Assad's regime partnered with the military to develop an effective force, focusing on alliances with Egypt and the Soviet Union, vital for reclaiming the Golan Heights (Fitzgerald, 1982; Hinnebusch, 2001; Ro'i, 1976; Seale, 1997). Assad's strategy additionally involved rebuilding diplomatic ties and frequent negotiations with Moscow, highlighting a strategic shift in Syrian foreign policy (Fitzgerald, 1982; Hinnebusch, 2001; Ro'i, 1976; Seale, 1997). He initially repaired ties with Arab nations, especially Egypt, and sought détente with previously adversarial nations. In 1972, Assad established a national front including the Communist party, though real power remained with the Ba'th (Ro'i, 1976). His diplomatic skills mediated tensions between Egypt and USSR post 1972 crisis (Ro'i, 1976).

When examining the policies implemented by Hafez al-Assad after consolidating power, it would be accurate to state that during this period, Syria emerged from the influence of former European powers and began to formulate more strategically independent decisions and policies. Additionally, it is also correct to observe that, alongside this development, the United States began to play an increasingly significant role in the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape. Syria's rising influence in Arab politics, its arrangements with Jordan and Palestinian organizations, and developments in Lebanon boosted its importance to Moscow, prompting a reconsideration of its special relationship with Moscow and a shift towards a more pro-American stance (Ro'i, 1976). This period on the other hand, saw severed diplomatic relations between Syria and the US, lasting from 1967 to 1974 (Seale, 1997). Assad's leadership, representing a shift towards a stable and strategically oriented Syria, navigated complex international relations, focusing on national

interests and territorial integrity (Lesch, 2012). Under Asad's leadership, Syria's GDP saw a nearly 10 percent annual increase in the first three years, largely due to economic liberalization initiatives (Drysdale and Hinnebusch, 1991).

Europe's approach to Assad's coup in 1970 was a blend of cautious engagement, strategic interest, and a desire for stability, all set Cold War dynamics and the Arab-Israeli conflict. European countries sought to maintain a working relationship with Syria, despite concerns about its domestic policies and its alignment with the Soviet Union. The period witnessed significant disagreements among European nations, particularly between France and the others regarding Israel's borders and the scope of its withdrawal. The UK was accused of collaborating with Israel. While the English version of UNSC Resolution 242 suggested a minimal withdrawal, the French version advocated for a complete retreat from all occupied territories (Bicchi and Voltalini, 2022; Brenchley, 2005). This division notwithstanding, the 1967 war acted as a catalyst for the EEC, prompting the development of foreign policy coordination mechanisms and a gradual shift towards the French interpretation of a complete removal of forces from land taken in 1967 (Bicchi and Voltalini, 2022; Miller, 2011).

Initially, the EC (European Community) identified the 1949 armistice line, commonly known as the Green Line, as the conceptual border between Israel and Palestine, given the absence of an internationally and locally recognized boundary (Bicchi and Voltalini, 2022). This approach was further elaborated upon in the EC's bilateral economic interactions with Israel and the Palestinians, where they established two legally distinct territorial entities, each governed by separate agreements (Bicchi and Voltalini, 2022). However, during the Six-Day War in 1967, the six Member States of the EEC (European Economic Community) found themselves unprepared for a unified response (Bicchi and Voltalini, 2022). By 1970, Europe's Middle Eastern influence had waned. Since it was founded in 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) has grown from being just about business and economy to being more politically unified entity with shared foreign policy objectives and a collective voice in international affairs. The group of six nations' collective decision to address the Middle East crisis signaled the end of Europe's dominance in the region (Möckli, 2009). Decolonization ended British and French control over various Middle Eastern countries, but they maintained economic, political, and cultural ties (Möckli, 2009).

3.2 Rise of Hafez Al-Assad: Major events of 1970s

The start of the Yom Kippur War in 1973 was attributed to several key factors. These included the failure of international actions to fix the Arab-Israeli conflict, the formation of a capable and willing Arab alliance against Israel, and the continuous arms supply from major world powers to their regional allies (Shlaim, 1996). The Syrian-Israeli conflict acquired a specific Syrian territorial aspect, focusing on the Golan Heights, gradually transforming it from an intractable national dispute to a negotiable territorial conflict, with the Golan being explicitly Syrian, thus subtly changing the concept of Arabism from a self-sacrificing cause to a means for achieving Syrian objectives (Hinnebusch, 2001). Syrian leaders began to redefine Arabism with a distinctly Syrian perspective, claiming that as the most committed frontline state against Israel, Syria was defending Arab interests, not just its own, particularly after Egypt stepped back from its Pan-Arab role, aligning Arab national interests with Syria's military-security needs (Hinnebusch, 2001). This period also saw Israel's steadfast refusal to revert to its pre-June 4, 1967 borders, contributing to the impasse in implementing UN Resolution 242 (Shlaim, 1996). Assad's establishment of a strong presidency and a solid Ba'th regime marked the first time the state elite had the relative independence to dictate foreign policy (Hinnebusch, 2001).

Egypt also played a pivotal role during this time. Following Anwar Sadat's ascension to the presidency in 1970, he shifted Egypt's approach from military strategies to seeking a political resolution (Shloim, 1996). In February 1971, Sadat publicly declared his willingness for a peaceful settlement with Israel, marking a critical juncture in the long-standing conflict (Shloim, 1996). This change in strategy included improved inter-Arab relations, notably between Egypt and Syria, and Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Sadat led the effort to use Arab resources, such as oil, to pressure Israel, aligning with Syria and seeking superpower intervention for a resolution (Shloim, 1996).

In a secret meeting in Damascus on September 22, Assad and Sadat resolved to launch their military action on October 6. Although Assad initially proposed a morning offensive, he agreed to Sadat's choice of an evening onset (Rabinovich, 2004). Sadat also coordinated with King Faisal of Saudi Arabia to impose an oil embargo against Western nations to leverage Israel and its allies (Rabinovich, 2004). The Soviet Union's role was also significant. During 1970-1973, the Soviet Union's approach in the Middle East fluctuated, influenced by efforts to reduce tensions with the United States (Shloim, 1996). This led to a temporary halt in military aid to Egypt and

prompted President Sadat to expel Soviet military advisors in 1972. However, by early 1973, the Soviets resumed arms shipments to Egypt, anticipating a planned attack on Israel (Shloim, 1996). The United States, under President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, viewed Israel as a strategic ally against Soviet influence in the Middle East and a deterrent to war. This led to increased U.S. military and economic support for Israel, without pressing for a return to pre-1967 borders (Shloim, 1996). Consequently, Assad incorrectly believed a counteroffensive could swiftly reclaim the Golan Heights (Rabinovich, 2004). The conflict that erupted on October 6, 1973, known as the "War of Ramadan" to Arabs, the "Yom Kippur War" to Israelis, and the "October War of 1973" in the West, highlighted these geopolitical tensions (O'balance, 1978).

The Syrian assault on the Golan Heights on the afternoon of October 6 nearly achieved a significant advance (Hughes, 2008). Israel rapidly deployed reinforcements to the northern front, and by October 10, the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) had pushed the Syrian forces back beyond the 1967 ceasefire line. Despite not holding any Israeli territory, Assad insisted on his ceasefire demands to honor the sacrifices of Syrian soldiers and to demonstrate their efforts were not in vain. Kissinger conveyed to Israel that Assad's steep demands indicated a willingness to negotiate (Rabinovich, 2007). This military action was not just a regional conflict but also a significant event in the Cold War, straining relations between the superpowers and leading to intense US-Soviet tensions. The breaches of the October 22 ceasefire escalated to such an extent that the Nixon administration initiated a nuclear alert, signaling the seriousness of the situation (Möckli, 2009).

The war altered Syria's international relations. Syria grew closer to the Soviet Union, which provided substantial military support. This deepened the Cold War dynamics in the Middle East. Moreover, the war's aftermath saw increased diplomatic activity, with Syria participating in the Geneva Peace Conference in 1973, marking a shift towards a more engaged diplomatic approach. The October War of 1973 had far-reaching consequences on the Western world, particularly on the Middle East and transatlantic relations. Although no significant military gains were achieved, it can be said that the outcomes of the 1973 war had diverse and profound implications for both the internal and external balances of Syria.

In 1974, post the 1973 war, Syria benefited from substantial financial assistance from Arab countries, receiving between \$1 billion and \$1.5 billion, a stark increase from the \$60 million received in 1973 (Pollack and Sinai, 1976). The year 1974 saw a surge in Syria's agricultural output and a significant boost in revenue from oil and phosphates, with oil revenues constituting about

two-thirds of Syria's foreign income compared to 15% in 1973 (Pollack and Sinai, 1976). Following the 1973 war and the subsequent surge in global oil prices, Syria not only achieved success in securing loans and grants from the World Bank, Western Europe, and the US but also experienced heightened economic growth, with its real GDP annually increasing by nearly 13 percent from 1973 to 1977, and saw a significant boost from substantial remittances sent back by Syrians working in the flourishing Arabian Peninsula due to the oil price increase, in addition to a tenfold increase in oil export revenue to \$700 million from 1973 to 1974, surpassing cotton as the nation's primary export, thereby not only bringing prosperity to certain segments of the population but also better equipping the government for its development projects (Drysdale and Hinnebusch, 1991).

The actions of Syria and Egypt in the war, combined with the effects of the Arab oil embargo, significantly enhanced their political clout. President Asad of Syria sought international support to pressure Israel into withdrawing from the occupied territories, employing a strategy that combined combat and dialogue (Hinnebusch, 2001). This was evident in his agreement to participate in the Golan Heights disengagement talks mediated by Henry Kissinger, although his position was weakened due to Egypt's earlier disengagement and the premature lifting of the oil embargo (Hinnebusch, 2001).

On the other hand, the October War led to an oil crisis that had a major effect to the international economics economy, especially on oil-dependent nations. The crisis manifested in soaring inflation and the imminent threat of a recession, disrupting the accustomed lifestyles of consumerism, affordable energy, and steady economic growth in industrialized countries (Möckli, 2009). OAPEC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) declared an oil export embargo on October 19, targeting nations that supported Israel, which only exacerbated the situation (Phelan, 2023). The ending of the embargo saw a price increase in oil from \$3 to nearly \$12 per barrel, significantly affecting economies worldwide, particularly in the U.S. (Phelan, 2023). The 1973 war and subsequent oil crisis prompted the EC to contemplate an independent and unified foreign policy on Israel/Palestine and a broader Global Mediterranean Policy focusing on bilateral trade, a practice that would become central to EC Middle East relations. When evaluating the consequences of the actions taken by Assad during this period from a European perspective, it can be said that they were different from past situations and more impactful. In Europe, the war and the ensuing oil crisis heightened security concerns. The possibility of a

conflict between global powers in the Middle East spreading to European soil was a real threat (Möckli, 2009). The European economies, heavily reliant on oil imports, were deeply affected by the crisis. Since the second World War, Europe's primary concern was not the Soviet Union's military force for the first time but the economic tactics of emerging countries, particularly Arab oil-producing nations (Möckli, 2009).

This situation introduced a new dimension to Europe's security concerns, emphasizing the North-South dynamics (Möckli, 2009). EC faced a complex challenge as Arab oil-producing nations varied their export limitations based on each EC member's alignment with the Arab stance. This required a nuanced approach in diplomacy and international relations (Möckli, 2009). As a result, the EPC achieved a significant milestone with the issuance of a Declaration on European Identity in mid-December 1973 (Möckli, 2009). This declaration pointed the following points with regard to the European Identity in Relation to the World:

“9. The Europe of the Nine is aware that, as it unites, it takes on new international obligations. European unification is not directed against anyone, nor is it inspired by a desire for power. On the contrary, the Nine are convinced that their union will benefit the whole international community since it will constitute an element of equilibrium and a basis for co-operation with all countries, whatever their size, culture or social system. The Nine intend to play an active rôle in world affairs and thus to contribute, in accordance with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, to ensuring that international relations have a more just basis; that the independence and equality of States are better preserved; that prosperity is more equitably shared; and that the security of each country is more effectively guaranteed. In pursuit of these objectives the Nine should progressively define common positions in the sphere of foreign policy;

10. As the Community progresses towards a common policy in relation to third countries, it will act in accordance with the following principles: (a) The Nine, acting as a single entity, will strive to promote harmonious and constructive relations with these countries. This should not however jeopardize, hold back or affect the will of the Nine to progress towards European Union within the time limits laid down. (b) In future when the Nine negotiate collectively with other countries, the institutions and procedures chosen should enable the distinct character of the European entity

to be respected. (c) In bilateral contacts with other countries, the Member States of the Community will increasingly act on the basis of agreed common positions;

13. The Community will implement its undertakings towards the Mediterranean and African countries in order to reinforce its long-standing links with these countries. The Nine intend to preserve their historical links with the countries of the Middle East and to co-operate over the establishment and maintenance of peace, stability and progress in the region.’’ (European Communities, 1973).

France played a pivotal role in this progress, recognizing the EPC as an essential tool for European integration, a perspective shaped by Europe's sidelined role during the October War (Möckli, 2009). The political turmoil of 1973 led to the need for renegotiation of existing agreements with Arab nations and initiated the establishment of the Euro-Arab Dialogue (Nonneman, 2005). By 1977, new trade and financial accords were established with countries in the Maghreb and Mashreq regions (Nonneman, 2005). However, attempts to establish the Euro-Arab Dialogue faltered due to US pressure (Bouris et al., 2022).

However, the EC, despite the political upheaval in Syria, refrained from pursuing cooperative relations with Damascus's administrations (Nonneman, 2005). France and the UK, on the other hand, were differently engaged in Syria's internal affairs (Nonneman, 2005). The 1973 war interrupted the nascent détente between the US and USSR and contributed to a global recession. It temporarily strained relations between the United States and its NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allies. In understanding Britain's response to the 1973 war, it's essential to consider the context of the first 25 years post-World War II. During this period, Britain's influence in the Middle East significantly waned, and economic challenges hindered its ability to maintain its military involvement and command over the area's oil output (Hughes, 2008). The Conservative government sustained a modest military presence in the Middle East, with British officers integrated into the armed forces of the UAE (United Arab Emirates) and providing military advisors to support the Sultan of Oman against left-wing guerrillas (Hughes, 2008). Beyond these military commitments, the UK primarily preserved its regional influence through commercial ventures, particularly military sales to oil-rich nations (Hughes, 2008). Acknowledging Egypt's important part in Arab politics and the desire of the West to limiting Soviet

influence in the Middle East, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office recommended fostering friendly relations with Egypt, even at the cost of weakening the UK's ties to Israel and the US (Hughes, 2008).

The EC initiated formal engagements with the MENA region through a series of bilateral agreements, commencing with preferential trade agreements with Lebanon and Israel in 1964. This initial phase was succeeded by a nascent form of association agreements with Morocco and Tunisia in 1969, followed by a trade agreement with Egypt in 1972. Concurrently, these developments paved the way for the establishment of 'cooperation agreements' with several MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries (Nonneman, 2005). This new strategic direction led to the signing of cooperation agreements with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia in 1976 and were extended to Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon between 1977 and 1978 (Nonneman, 2005). These agreements represented a significant expansion of the EC's diplomatic and economic relations within the MENA region, reflecting a broader policy shift towards increased engagement and partnership with these countries (Nonneman, 2005).

The foundational framework governing the relationship between the EU and Syria is anchored in the Cooperation Agreement, established in 1977 (European External Action Service, 2016). This landmark agreement, signed on January 18, 1977, was driven by a mutual desire to enhance friendly relations in line with the principles of the UN Charter (EEC-Syria Cooperation Agreement, 1977). Central to this agreement is the commitment to establish comprehensive cooperation aimed at contributing to Syria's economic and social development, thereby strengthening relations between the EEC and Syria that is embodied in the resolutions to promote economic and trade cooperation, considering their respective levels of development and in compliance with international obligations (EEC-Syria Cooperation Agreement, 1977).

One of the key features of the agreement is the emphasis on creating a new model for relations between developed and developing states. This model is intended to align with the international community's aspirations towards a more just and balanced economic order. The agreement includes provisions for economic, technical, and financial cooperation, trade, and the establishment of a Cooperation Council to guide and oversee the implementation of these cooperative measures (EEC-Syria Cooperation Agreement, 1977).

The EEC-Syria Cooperation Agreement also prioritizes the development of Syria's production and economic infrastructure to diversify its economic structure. This involves the

EEC's participation in industrializing Syria and modernizing its agriculture. It also includes measures to promote the marketing and sales of Syrian products, boost industrial production, facilitate the acquisition of patents and industrial property, and remove barriers impeding market access. Additionally, the agreement highlights cooperation in science, technology, environmental protection, and the development of Syria's natural resources (EEC-Syria Cooperation Agreement, 1977). This agreement exemplifies the EEC's commitment to supporting the development of its partner countries and fostering international cooperation based on mutual benefit and respect. The EEC-Syria Cooperation Agreement stands as a testament to the potential of international agreements in promoting economic development and inter-regional cooperation.

In conclusion, the October War of 1973 had a profound and lasting impact on the West. It not only exacerbated instability in the Middle East but also strained superpower relations, created rifts in transatlantic ties, and led to serious economic crises. The war prompted a reevaluation of political and economic strategies, leading to new alliances and changes in international diplomacy. The events of 1973 marked a significant shift in the global power dynamic, emphasizing the importance of the Middle East in world affairs and highlighting the interconnected nature of global politics and economics.

Beginning in early 1975, President Assad reignited the 'Greater Syria' concept, a notion that gained popularity in the late 1940s and early 1950s and envisioned unifying Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine into a single political and geographical entity, driven by the fact that the current borders of these four countries lack historical roots in the Arab world, with Assad's trip to Beirut in January 1975 marking the initial step towards this vision, especially since Syria has historically not recognized Lebanon as a separate entity, maintaining that Lebanon was unjustly separated from Syrian territory by the French at the end of their mandate in a final effort to weaken Syria (Dishon, 1976). Observations in 1975 led some analysts to suggest that a 'Greater Syria,' encompassing Syria, Jordan, and a Syrian and Palestinian-influenced Lebanon, was emerging with Soviet backing, potentially becoming a hub of pro-Soviet activities in the Middle East (Freedman, 1976). Syria's intervention in Lebanon in 1975 was a key moment in the region's history, shaped by complex factors including international relations, religious and ethnic divisions, and Syria's own strategic goals. Beginning in 1976, Syria stepped into Lebanon, ostensibly as a peacekeeping entity. This move, sanctioned initially by the Arab League, was intended to stabilize the intensifying situation of the Lebanese Civil War.

Initially, the Soviet Union approved of the Asad regime's efforts to mitigate the escalating conflict in Lebanon in 1975, given Syria's alignment with the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) and leftists (Drysdale and Hinnebusch, 1991). By April 1975, the conflict between Lebanon's wealthy, conservative Christians and its impoverished, leftist Muslims and Palestinians had escalated into a full-blown civil war (Waage and Huse, 2019). After a year of conflict, the leftist–Palestinian militias were on the brink of a military triumph over the Christian militias (Waage and Huse, 2019). Amidst the escalating civil war in Lebanon in early Fall, where Christian forces clashed with Muslims and Palestinians, Syria's involvement became increasingly direct. Both Damascus and Moscow perceived the turmoil in Lebanon as a result of a US-backed Zionist strategy to divide the Arab nations and facilitate an isolated Egyptian-Israeli agreement (Drysdale and Hinnebusch, 1991). As the Lebanese civil war intensified, Syria's intervention grew more conspicuous, culminating in the deployment of a Palestinian army under Syrian command to reestablish order. Successfully implementing a temporary Pax Syriana by early February 1976, though Syria's long-term objectives remained ambiguous (Freedman, 1976, p.88). This intervention led to a difficult situation for its Soviet allies, prompting Leonid I. Brezhnev³⁰ to send a critical letter to Asad in July, threatening sanctions if Syria did not withdraw (Drysdale and Hinnebusch, 1991).

Although the Soviet Union temporarily halted arms deliveries and Asad disregarded the criticism, he avoided a complete fallout with the Soviets, who eventually came to accept Syria's role in Lebanon (Drysdale and Hinnebusch, 1991). Syria's military intervention against the leftist–PLO coalition in the spring of 1976 was motivated not by an affinity for the Christians but by a desire to maintain control over Lebanon (Waage and Huse, 2019). Assad believed that as long as he could frame his controversial decisions as vital to the ongoing conflict with Israel, domestic opposition could be managed, though such decisions had their domestic repercussions, notably the 1976 action against Palestinians which significantly undermined the regime's legitimacy, leading to its vulnerability to Islamic rebellions from 1977 to 1982 (Hinnebusch, 2001). The Ba'thi government, by participating in the Lebanese civil war in 1976, squandered its political gains from the 1973 war, a move that not only brought economic repercussions through dwindling financial support from Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states in response to Syria's aggression against

³⁰ Leonid Brezhnev, a leading figure in the Soviet Union, held the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1964 to 1982, during which he witnessed both a slowdown in economic growth and a phase of eased tensions with Western countries.

Palestinians but also imposed a significant economic strain on the Syrian economy by maintaining a substantial military presence in Lebanon (Drysdale and Hinnebusch, 1991).

3.3 Rise of Muslim Brothers: Domestic Rivalries, Hama Massacre and Approachment with Iran

The late 1970s in Syria were characterized by economic stagnation and inflation, exacerbating the difficulties of the urban lower-middle class and peasantry, who were already alienated by rapid urbanization and modernization that ignored their traditional ways of life (Seale, 1989). The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, influenced by its Egyptian counterpart, emerged as a formidable opposition force, appealing to those dissatisfied with Ba'athist ideology and its practical applications (Seale, 1989).

Although organized Islamic tensions emerged towards the late 1970s, it would be incorrect to overlook the preceding period. Therefore, revisiting the rise of the Ba'ath Party during its formative years is crucial in understanding this context. In early 1964, tensions in Syria escalated with a series of protests in urban areas. Religious leaders delivered incendiary sermons denouncing the secular, socialist Ba'ath regime, inciting riots and closing marketplaces (Seale, 1989). By April 1964, the disturbances intensified, resembling a religious conflict, with the use of firearms marking a significant escalation in the violence. In May 1967, an article perceived as atheistic in the Syrian army's magazine triggered widespread protests. Early in 1973, uprisings against Assad's government emerged following the removal of Islam as the state religion in a proposed constitution. This led to an underground war against the regime, spearheaded by the fundamentalist Muslim Brothers.

Syria's difficult external environment had a major impact on the development of the Baathist dictatorship under Assad into a sizable national security organization, especially the need to recapture the Golan Heights from Israel and balance Israeli dominance (Hinnebusch, 2014). Assad established a centralized power structure akin to a "presidential monarchy," established with the help of the Baath party, the armed forces, a core of largely Alawi loyalists in the security forces, and coerced business owners, mostly from Damascus, who profited from a limited degree of economic liberalization or from their ties to the government (Hinnebusch, 2014, p.213). This structure led to a tacit alliance between the Damascene Sunni bourgeoisie and Alawi military elites

at the regime's apex, while the Baath party and its auxiliary organizations—comprising workers, peasants, and youth unions—engaged a broad base of popular support, especially in rural areas, cutting across Sunni and non-Sunni communities (Hinnebusch, 2014). As the regime solidified, public opinion's influence on shaping foreign policy diminished compared to earlier periods, yet this approach to policy-making, exemplified by the unpopular decision to intervene against the PLO in Lebanon in 1976, incurred legitimacy costs that potentially contributed to the regime's vulnerability to the Islamic rebellion from 1977 to 1982 (Hinnebusch, 2014). The period of 1976-1977 saw a decline in Syria's economic growth as countries like Saudi Arabia, reacting to public disapproval of Asad's actions against Palestinians in Lebanon, reduced their financial support. In June 1979, 32 cadets, predominantly Alawites, at the artillery school in Aleppo were slain by Assad's adversaries (Dickey, 1987).

A critical juncture in the Muslim Brotherhood's opposition to the Ba'ath regime was the Aleppo massacre³¹ in 1979, marking a transition from predominantly peaceful resistance to armed insurgency, and initiating a period of intensified conflict between the government and the Brotherhood. Assad's forces, including units under the direct command of his brother, responded to this uprising with remarkable brutality, demolishing much of Hama and causing the deaths of thousands of its residents. On 15 February 1982, the Syrian Defence Minister announced the suppression of the Hama uprising after several days of intense bombardment. Nevertheless, the city remained encircled and isolated (Amnesty International, 2012). The regime's response was not only suppressive but also indiscriminate, often broadly targeting Sunni communities, rather than exclusively focusing on armed insurgents (Seale, 1989). All in all, Seale (1989) claimed that the massacre in Hama transcended being merely a tactical reaction to a rebellion; it represented a strategic maneuver by Asad aimed at fortifying his authority and suppressing any potential future opposition by demonstrating an indisputable show of force. In the aftermath of a military defeat, the Islamist opposition in Syria retreated to regroup, marking a pause in the Syrian conflict that would resurface in 2011 (Shoup, 2018).

The internal political landscape of Syria under the leadership of President Hafiz al-Asad was often characterized by its complexity and the prevalence of secretive maneuvering and potential conspiracies, reminiscent of Byzantine diplomacy and courtly machinations (Shoup, 2018, p.131). In the domestic scene in this era also seen crises. This complexity was epitomized

in 1984 when, following the suppression of an Islamic rebellion, President al-Asad faced an attempted coup from his brother, Rifʿat al-Asad, during a period of illness. As a pivotal figure in Syrian politics, Rifʿat al-Asad not only significantly aided Hafiz al-Asad's rise to power but also played a crucial role in quelling the Hama uprising, additionally, known for his Western orientation, Rifʿat al-Asad diverged from his brother by advocating for more freedom in the private sector, challenging Hafez al-Asad's policies (McHugo, 2014). Furthermore, Rifʿat al-Asad frequently criticized his brother's strategies, particularly highlighting the negative consequences of Syria's alienation from Western nations due to its support for terrorism and an unsustainable military rivalry with Israel (McHugo, 2014). As Hafiz al-Asad recovered in 1984, the loyalty of officers initially backing Rifʿat began to waver. Following this fraternal conflict, Rifʿat was first dispatched on a diplomatic mission to Moscow and subsequently went into exile in Geneva (Shoup, 2018). This conflict between the Assad brothers emphasizes the centralization of authority within the president's close-knit group and underlines the importance of family connections in the workings of Syrian political dynamics.

When examining the political history of Syria, the influence of regional balances has been previously noted. Additionally, the significance of changing dynamics in the region, such as the emergence of new allies and the fading of old ones, also plays a substantial role. From a foreign policy point of view, the 1979 Islamic revolution transformed Iran from a pro-Israel and pro-United States ally into a vehemently anti-Zionist state, becoming a prospective ally for Syria in balancing Arab-Israeli power dynamics (Hinnebusch, 2014). Islamic Iran's staunch anti-Zionism and strategic significance made it a valuable partner for Syria in the Arab-Israeli power equation, countering Syria's relative isolation (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 1997). The early 1980s also saw the Reagan administration propose a peace plan that ignored the issue of Israel's control over the Golan Heights that led to increased cooperation between Syria and the Soviet Union to counter what they perceived as American unilateralism in the Middle East (Dickey, 1987). This omission prompted Syria and the Soviet Union to strengthen their cooperation as a countermeasure to what they viewed as American dominance in Middle Eastern affairs (Cobban, 1991). In October 1980, the Soviet Union and Syria formalized their alliance through a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. This treaty obligated both nations to promptly coordinate their stances in response to any threats to their peace or security, however, Soviet analysts emphasized that this agreement did not extend to the Syrian forces stationed in Lebanon at the time (Dickey, 1987). By the early 1980s,

shared threats from 'imperialist' forces brought Syria and Iran closer, with Iran feeling isolated and severely threatened by Iraq's 1980 invasion, which it attributed to 'imperialist' encouragement thus, Syria, feeling increasingly vulnerable, found common ground with Iran (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 1997).

Israel's empowerment to invade Lebanon in 1982 and intensify its colonization and oppression in the Palestinian territories was partly due to the neutralization of Egypt, its primary military adversary, through the Camp David agreement (Zunes, 2014). However, during the intense Israeli offensives against Syrian and Palestinian positions in Lebanon from June to August 1982, the Soviet Union provided minimal assistance to its allies (Dickey, 1987). The Syrian-Iranian alliance, framed as an 'anti-imperialist' front, became particularly evident in their aligned objectives in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in 1982 (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 1997). The rise of Hezbollah (Party of God), a more militant and religious Shi'ite party formed in 1982, coincided with the decline of the secular Shi'ite party, Amal, particularly in confronting Israeli forces (Shoup, 2018). Gaining momentum from the Israeli occupation, Hezbollah, with Iranian support, increased its popularity among Lebanese Shi'ites, eventually prompting an Israeli withdrawal to a southern buffer zone under the Lebanese Maronite Sa'd Haddad's command, followed by a full withdrawal in 2000 (Shoup, 2018). By the end of June 1982, it became evident that the Soviet Union had experienced a significant decline in its reputation among Arab nations due to its inadequate support for Syria during the conflict (Dickey, 1987). Following these events, the US took the lead in brokering a complex ceasefire in Lebanon, which involved the PLO, Syria, Israel, Lebanon, and various Lebanese militias in an initiative that marked the US as the primary mediator in the situation (Cobban, 1991). The US faced setbacks in its regional policies, notably with the withdrawal of the Multi-National Force from Lebanon in 1984 and the failure of its peace initiatives, while Soviet-Syrian relations were marked by both collaboration and underlying tensions (Dickey, 1987). These issues primarily strained Israel's relations with Arab countries, Lebanon, and Syria. The final declaration, as Barbé (1996) notes, incorporated a compromise on self-determination, aligning with the UN Charter and international law, while simultaneously addressing Israel's concerns about territorial integrity. The limited success of Syria's efforts to link self-determination with resistance against territorial occupation and Israel's objections to references affecting southern Lebanon and Palestinian regions further complicated these negotiations (Barbé, 1996).

3.4 End of Cold War and the Rise of the New Lion: Syria's Opening to the West during 1990s

For four decades, Arab republics, including Syria, had depended heavily on the Soviet Union for military, developmental, and diplomatic support (Rogan, 2017). The Soviet-Syrian relationship reached a critical juncture in 1987 when Soviet President Gorbachev criticized Syria's policy towards Israel, marking a strategic shift from military to diplomatic resolutions in the Arab-Israeli conflict (Dickey, 1987; Cobban, 1991). This pivot was further emphasized in 1989 when Gorbachev refused Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad's request for advanced weaponry (Rogan, 2017). These developments signaled a weakening of the traditional Soviet-Arab alliance. The end of the Cold War heralded a significant transformation in the geopolitical landscape, particularly for Arab republics like Syria, which had historically aligned with the Soviet Union. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, symbolizing the end of the Cold War, introduced a period of uncertainty for Arab nations, including Syria (Rogan, 2017). The emergent unipolar world order, dominated by the United States, compelled Arab leaders to adapt to the new international political dynamics. Syria's reaction to these changes was multifaceted, encompassing a strategic realignment and economic liberalization. The Ta'if Agreement, initiated in 1989, played a crucial role in ending the Lebanese Civil War, with Syria as a key player (Shoup, 2018). The agreement, supported by various Arab nations, aimed to resolve the proxy conflict between Syria and Iraq in Lebanon. The subsequent Syria-Lebanon Treaty of Brotherhood and Cooperation in 1991 further solidified Syrian influence in Lebanon.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent American-led coalition to liberate Kuwait saw Syria aligning with the United States and supporting the Taif Accord (Rogan, 2017; Shoup, 2018). This alignment was a strategic move by Hafez al-Assad to strengthen ties with emergent powers while maintaining influence over Lebanon.

Post-Cold War, Syria initiated economic reforms, liberalizing its economy and reducing reliance on the Soviet Union (McHugo, 2014; Halliday, 2005). This included encouraging private investment, particularly in tourism, and opening sectors traditionally reserved for the public sector to private and foreign investments (Halliday, 2005). These reforms marked a significant departure from the state-controlled economic planning prevalent in Syria for decades. The 1990s saw Syria

revitalizing its economic relationships with Western European nations (McHugo, 2014). The European Union's strategy to integrate Syria into its Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, as part of the Barcelona Declaration in 1995, was a key initiative in this regard (Leverett, 2006). This partnership aimed at fostering democratization, human rights, and economic development in the Mediterranean region (Goes and Leenders, 2006).

The Barcelona Declaration, initiated in 1995, marked a strategic move by the EU to forge stronger ties with Mediterranean countries, including Syria (Leverett, 2006). The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, as it was known, was not just a diplomatic endeavor but a comprehensive effort to integrate these nations into a Euro-Mediterranean free trade area by 2010. The policy objectives encompassed democratization, human rights, and economic development, reflecting the EU's commitment to fostering stable and prosperous societies in its southern neighborhood (Goes and Leenders, 2006). Syria's involvement in the Barcelona Process was a significant step in its foreign policy, indicating a willingness to engage with European nations on a range of issues. The process represented a shift in the traditional security-focused approach of the EU towards the Mediterranean countries, emphasizing economic, social, and political development as integral to regional stability (Suzan, 2003).

This shift was indicative of the EU's broader strategy to address security concerns through development and cooperation. An essential aspect of the Barcelona Process was its role in the EU's counter-terrorism strategy. The process marked a departure from the Cold War-era security frameworks, focusing instead on collaborative efforts to address underlying socio-economic and political issues contributing to instability in the region (Suzan, 2003). This approach underscored the EU's belief in shared responsibility and common objectives with its Mediterranean partners, including Syria. The strengthening of Syria-EU ties under the Barcelona Process presented significant economic opportunities for Syria, especially given its strained relations with the United States post the 2003 Iraq invasion (Gupta et al., 2016). The EU's external policies offered not only economic aid but also technical assistance, crucial for establishing a free trade area in the Mediterranean. However, Syria's cautious approach to economic reform, coupled with its reluctance to fully engage with external financial institutions, posed challenges in fully leveraging the benefits of this partnership (Zorob, 2008).

4 Syria In the 21st Century

4.1 From Succession to Struggle: The Evolution of Syrian Politics Under Bashar al-Assad in the Early 21st Century

When exploring the political history of Syria in the 21st century, several key factors come into play. These include the aftermath of the Cold War, the country's growing rapprochement with the European Union and the Western bloc and shifts in regional power dynamics. However, an event of profound significance in 1994 set the stage for Bashar al-Assad's emergence as a prominent figure in the Syrian Arab Republic. In that year, a tragic turn of events altered the course of Syrian leadership. Basil Assad, the eldest son of Hafez Assad and his apparent heir, died in a traffic accident. This unforeseen tragedy led to a dramatic change in the succession plan. Bashar, who was pursuing medical studies in London at the time, was summoned back home by his grieving father. Unlike Basil, who had been groomed for leadership, Bashar's initial path was far removed from the corridors of power. He had chosen a career in medicine, a field in which he furthered his studies in the UK. His return to Syria marked a significant transition from a life dedicated to medical science to one immersed in the complexities of political leadership. Bashar, initially hesitant to step into his brother's role, began to actively engage in Syrian politics around 1998, preparing for leadership (McHugo, 2014). He entered the military academy in Syria and gradually assumed more responsibilities in the final years of Hafez's presidency (Rogan, 2017).

Bashar started his rule after a three-decade rule of his father. Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as leader of a centralized, authoritarian presidential system in Syria, assuming all his father's formal roles, including commander-in-chief of the army and general secretary of the Ba'ath party, and leading the Progressive National Front (Perthes, 2004). Although during his three-decade rule Hafez sustained political stability in Syria to some extent, his rule was marked by a strict authoritarian rule, limited political freedom and suppression of any kind of opposition. The Syrian political scene in this era was dominated by the Baath Party, and the political power was under Hafez's elite and Assad family. Upon assuming power, Bashar al-Assad faced a corrupt, nomenklatura-run state, hampered by an inefficient public sector (McHugo, 2014).

Upon taking office, Bashar al-Assad prioritized domestic issues over foreign policy, differing from his father Hafiz al-Assad's focus on regional politics and the Arab Israeli conflict,

while maintaining Syria's commitment to peace and focusing on the country's development (Perthes, 2004). In his inaugural speech on 17 July, shortly after his father's death, President Bashar al-Assad praised his father's achievements and criticized aspects of Syrian society and government, including policy failures, while discussing expected topics like the Golan Heights and peace with Israel (Sachs, 2000). The transition of power to Bashar al-Assad ushered in the Damascus Spring. Al-Assad initiated some liberalization measures after taking office, like releasing political prisoners, licensing new newspapers, encouraging open debate, and supporting civil rights groups, fostering a brief period of political freedom and dialogue known as the Damascus Spring (McHugo, 2014).

This period saw the emergence of political forums, discussion groups, and a civil society movement. Intellectuals, activists, and ordinary citizens began openly discussing issues such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This was a stark contrast to the political climate under Hafez al-Assad, where such discussions were heavily censored and could lead to severe repercussions. The Damascus Spring saw the emergence of numerous discussion forums where intellectuals and political activists gathered to debate issues related to political reform, human rights, and the future of Syria. However, there was an unprecedented level of public critique of government policies and calls for democratic reforms, including the lifting of the decades-long emergency law, freedom of the press, and political pluralism. Bashar al-Assad's power stemmed from his presidential status, legitimacy as his father's heir within the Alawi sect and the party, his representation of a younger generation in a previously aging regime, his understanding of globalization and new technologies, his relative popularity, and his systematic appointment of trusted individuals to key positions, which led to significant leadership changes in Syria (Perthes, 2004). The Syrian regime elite under Bashar al-Assad was divided into three tendencies: conservatives advocating for continuity and minimal change; modernizers, led by Assad and his team, pushing for technical modernization and gradual reforms; and democratic reformists, a diverse group calling for fundamental systemic change, including political reforms and the establishment of the rule of law (Perthes, 2004).

In this context, capitalizing on the atmosphere of political freedom brought about by the Damascus Spring, and with the aim of critiquing the current state of the country and offering solutions to these problematic situations, certain intellectuals collectively published a statement known as the "Statement by 99" in September of the year 2000. As Syria steps into the 21st

century, the "Statement by 99" emphasized the need for collective citizen effort to meet challenges of peace, modernization, and global integration, advocating for the end of long-standing martial law, a public pardon for political detainees and exiles, the establishment of laws protecting freedoms of assembly, press, and expression, and the liberation of public life from restrictive laws and surveillance to foster social harmony, economic competition, and widespread involvement in the nation's development and prosperity (Statement by 99, 2000).

However, the optimism of the Damascus Spring was quickly quashed as regime loyalists, the Ba'ath Party, and security officials resisted these reforms, leading to a reinstatement of political restrictions and the arrest of many activists by the summer of 2001, casting doubt on the sincerity of these reforms (McHugo, 2014). The initial tolerance by the government was short-lived. By the spring of 2001, the regime began to clamp down on the movement. Although al-Assad hinted at a commitment to Syrian democracy reflective of its culture and societal needs, he left open the possibility of delaying or abandoning this path, suggesting he could use timing or circumstances as justifications (McHugo, 2014). In the end, it can be argued that the sudden crackdown on the Damascus Spring initiatives had widespread effects on Syria's political landscape, laying the groundwork for discontent that would later become a key factor in the start and intensification of the Syrian Civil War. Post-'Damascus Spring,' Assad shifted focus from slogans of reform to economic and administrative modernization, initiating private banking, private universities, and promoting technocrats, while retiring many old guard members (Reilly, 2018). Syria welcomed private banks in 2004 and insurance companies in 2005, and implemented legal reforms in investment, taxation, and anti-monopolistic practices to liberalize its economy (McHugo, 2014).

Moreover, although Assad has shown a desire to focus on domestic policies, he found himself at the center of another event that has ignited, deeply impacting him, his policies, and his country. The Second Intifada, also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, was a period of intensified Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This uprising began in September 2000 and lasted until around 2005. The Middle East peace process faced a significant crisis in 2000 due to escalating violence between Israelis and Palestinians, sparked by Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon's visit to a contentious Islamic holy site in Jerusalem (Youngs, 2001). In 2006, Baroud critically examined the circumstances surrounding the Second Palestinian Intifada, particularly focusing on the flawed Camp David II talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. The account also highlighted Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount,

which served as a catalyst for the subsequent escalation in violence, critically assessing the Israeli government's policies under Sharon's leadership and their significant impact on the Palestinian population. Following the failed Camp David summit in July 2000, where negotiators couldn't agree on key issues like Jerusalem's sovereignty and the future of a Palestinian state, efforts to restart negotiations were further hampered by ongoing violence and political instability in Israel (House of Commons, 2001). In this regard, in 2002 a plan was proposed by the Quartet on the Middle East, an influential group comprising four major global entities: the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations. The "Roadmap for Peace," was a comprehensive plan aimed at resolving the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the 2002 Middle East Road Map to Peace, led by the US, EU, and Russia, notably excluded Syria from its proceedings (Shoup, 2018).

In addition to Syria's brief endeavor at internal reform, a pivotal event unfolded on September 11, 2001, far from the Middle East but with profound global, regional, and national repercussions for Syria. On this day, terrorists affiliated with Al-Qaeda hijacked four airplanes in the United States, launching suicide attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. This catastrophe not only represented a milestone in global history but also signaled a change in international political arena. In response, the administration of President George W. Bush in the United States adopted a decidedly more aggressive stance towards the Middle East, setting in motion a series of political and military actions that would have lasting impacts on the region, including Syria. This event symbolized a turning point, after which the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, and Syria's role within it, would be significantly altered. Following the attacks reminiscent of Pearl Harbor, President George W. Bush declared a "war on terror" against al-Qaeda, aiming to eliminate the Islamist militants responsible for the surprise assault on America (McHugo, 2014).

The position the Syrian administration would take in the face of this incident was very important in terms of the consequences it would create for the country. Under the leadership of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, Syria's strategic alliances with Palestinian militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and later Hezbollah, positioned it as a key player in Middle Eastern politics and an opponent of Israel, but also drew scrutiny from the U.S. following the September 11 attacks, despite Syria's lack of direct ties with al Qaeda (Reilly, 2018). The U.S. and Israel accused Syria of aiding the Iraqi war effort, including allegations of transferring military technology and

potentially harboring Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, although evidence primarily indicated only the importation of military equipment through Syria, with no substantiated claims of Syria agreeing to store Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (Perthes, 2004).

This same diplomatic balancing act was evident in Syria's role in the UN Security Council during the Iraq war, reflecting a consistent foreign policy approach that sought to navigate complex regional politics while maintaining its own strategic interests. Syria, as the sole Arab nation on the UN Security Council during 2002-2003, played a notable role in the lead-up to the Iraq war, supporting Resolution 1441 under certain conditions but opposing a subsequent resolution that would have legitimized military action against Iraq, reflecting a stance that was relatively supportive of Baghdad within the Arab world (Perthes, 2004), thus, reflecting a cautious approach towards overt involvement in America's Iraq war (Ignatius, 2003). Assad emphasized the importance of dignity in Arab culture and cautioned that U.S. policies lacking this understanding are likely to fail (Ignatius, 2003). In an interview with Lebanon's *as-Safir* newspaper, Assad acknowledged the U.S. as a superpower capable of occupying Iraq but expressed skepticism about their ability to maintain control, predicting significant resistance (Steele, 2003).

After these events, the United States initiated a military operation in Iraq in the year 2003. In 2003, France and Germany initially didn't join the U.S.-led war in Iraq, but Germany eventually assisted the U.S., and the UK's involvement was mainly due to Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision, against his party and public opinion (Ismael and Perry, 2014). In the 2003 Iraq coalition, the UK, Australia, and Poland actively engaged in military operations, while countries like Spain, Italy, and the Vilnius Group³² provided diplomatic support, leading to the swift defeat of the Iraqi army and the eventual capture and execution of Saddam Hussein. The Syrian leadership significantly underestimated the strength and speed of the U.S.-led military campaign in Iraq, which resulted in the unexpected and rapid fall of Baghdad, leading to a drastically altered strategic situation for Syria, now bordered by a U.S.-dominated Iraq and Israel (Perthes, 2004).

It can be suggested that the result of the invasion of Iraq, leading to Iraq's defeat and the downfall of its government, had deep impacts on the future of Syria and its later political tactics, especially in light of the measures taken by the Syrian government before and during the conflict.

³² The Vilnius Group was a coalition of Central European and Baltic nations formed in May 2000 in Lithuania, aiming for NATO membership in the aftermath of the Cold War. This group worked together to support their NATO accession efforts by exchanging insights, aligning their strategies for joining the alliance, and jointly advocating for their admission.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq not only disrupted that country but also had far-reaching effects in the region, notably in Syria as the occupation aggravated existing sectarian tensions within Iraq, which subsequently escalated and spread across the region. This upheaval particularly affected Syria, where the repercussions of these heightened religious and sectarian conflicts were profoundly felt (Chomsky, 2014). However, Ziadeh (2010) claimed that the Syrian government, perceived as relatively stable and secular, appeared more appealing to many Syrians when compared to the chaotic situation in Iraq. The most significant impact of the Iraq war on Syria was the decline of its diplomatic relations with the United States and the European Union, a shift marked by the transition from earlier acknowledgments of Syria's anti-terrorism efforts and collaboration with the CIA in sharing intelligence on Al Qaeda post-September 11 attacks, to a post-war period where Syria increasingly became the focus of American official rhetoric and potential punitive actions, despite the previous era of cooperative intelligence exchange (Ziadeh, 2010). The U.S. issued a series of demands to Syria in the post-Iraq war period, encompassing non-interference in Iraq, cessation of support for radical Palestinian groups, compliance with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and actions against Hezbollah and Syrian military presence in Lebanon, with military consequences implied for non-compliance (Perthes, 2004). Post-2003, US efforts to isolate Bashar al-Assad's Syria led to a closer alignment with Iran and Hezbollah, although Syria managed to mitigate this dependence through a parallel alliance with Turkey, opposing US pressures (Hinnebusch, 2014).

In 2004, a series of events indicative of instability commenced in the country. During a football match in March 2004 between two teams in the city of Qamishli, conflicts erupted between Arab and Kurdish supporters. The tragic outcome was largely attributed to the deployment of lethal force by security personnel. During the incident at the Qamishli football stadium on 12 March, at least 36 individuals, predominantly Kurds, lost their lives (Amnesty International, 2005). Amidst its own insecurity and apprehensions about U.S. intentions, the Syrian government attempted to pacify domestic unrest by releasing prisoners and conferring citizenship on numerous stateless Kurds in its northeast, a move that preluded the Kurdish issue's resurgence as a central challenge in Syria, especially during the subsequent civil war (Reilly, 2018). Moreover, The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, initiated by various Syrian political groups and national figures in 2005. The Damascus Declaration of 2005 advocated for a democratic, peaceful, and gradual transformation of Syria's authoritarian regime, emphasizing the establishment of a

state founded on modern constitutional principles that ensure equality, pluralism, and free political participation for all citizens, irrespective of their religious or ethnic backgrounds, and called for a democratic resolution to the Kurdish issue, the abolition of emergency laws, and the fostering of a professional, non-political national army, with the overarching goal of ending despotism and building a modern, free Syria.

4.2 Lebanon Issue

One of the legacies Bashar al-Assad inherited from his father pertained to the Lebanese affair. Since 1975, Syria has established its presence in Lebanon. By the year 2000, Israeli forces had completed their withdrawal from Southern Lebanese territories. Following this event some protests took place in Lebanon's streets opposing Syria's presence. The escalation of arrests by Lebanese security forces targeting Syrian occupation dissenters, coupled with the augmentation of Syrian military forces, marks a significant phase in Lebanon's Second Republic history, representing the most severe crackdown on the Lebanese nationalist movement since Syria's military dominance in 1990 (Gambill, 2001). In 2004, Syria exerted its influence on Lebanese parliamentarians to secure the re-election of President Emile Lahoud for an additional three years, a move that necessitated a constitutional amendment (McHugo, 2014). This action, widely condemned as unconstitutional, estranged numerous members of the Lebanese political elite who had previously been amenable to Syrian influence, most notably Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri who was prompted by support from France, the United States, and Saudi Arabia, Hariri embarked on strategizing an electoral coalition with politicians sharing his anti-Syrian stance, in preparation for the imminent parliamentary elections in Lebanon (Reilly, 2018).

Rafik Hariri was a distinguished Lebanese businessperson and political figure, notable for holding the office of Prime Minister of Lebanon across multiple terms. He also played a key role in the reconstruction of Beirut in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War. Hariri's tenure was marked by his efforts to restore the city's former glory and infrastructure. Additionally, he was recognized for establishing strong connections with Western and Gulf states, for positioning Lebanon as a key player in regional and international diplomacy. On February 14, 2005, in Beirut, Lebanon, Rafik Hariri was assassinated in a massive car bombing that killed 21 others and injured many people. On March 14, 2005, one million Lebanese gathered in downtown Beirut, calling for

Syria's full withdrawal from Lebanon, marking the initial occurrence of large-scale public protests that would later be emblematic of the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011 (Hinnebusch, 2014). The Syrian government acquiesced to remove its armed soldiers and intelligence personnel from Lebanon as a result of strong international pressure and the full support of the United States, which charged Syria of funding terrorism., concluding nearly three decades of occupation, with the last troops leaving on April 26 (Rogan, 2017). After a series of intermittent investigations spanning several years, the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon indicted five Hezbollah members for the murder of Hariri, though no charges were levied against Syrian officials, including President Assad, despite Hezbollah's close ties with Syria (Simons, 2013). Bashar appeared to have lost the geopolitical advantages his father had amassed by the middle of the 2000s. (Hinnebusch, 2014).

In the summer of 2006, Hezbollah's incursion into Israel and subsequent capture of Israeli soldiers led to a fierce Israeli retaliation, devastating southern Lebanon and its infrastructure. Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora stated that Israeli airstrikes displaced approximately 500,000 people, and according to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, over 140,000 of these individuals have sought refuge in Syria since the crisis began (CNN, 2006). The conflict, marked by war crimes on both sides, stalled diplomatic efforts at the UN for a ceasefire, with the U.S. and allies like the UK's Tony Blair government seemingly delaying the process, even as Arab nations like Egypt and Gulf monarchies tacitly supported this approach (McHugo, 2014). On August 11, 2006, the United Nations Security Council, in a unanimous decision, endorsed UN Security Council Resolution 1701, aiming to cease the ongoing hostilities. Despite the substantial damage inflicted on Lebanon's infrastructure and superstructure by Israel's approximately month-long military campaign, it can be argued that the repercussions were relatively more advantageous from the standpoint of the Syrian government, especially under the Assad administration. The conflict ultimately elevated Hezbollah's standing in the Arab world and Lebanese politics, bridging Sunni-Shi'i divides temporarily, and enhanced Syria's regional influence, particularly under Bashar al-Assad, following the regained prominence after the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri (McHugo, 2014). Syria regained its diplomatic prominence in international, regional, and Arab politics following the Israeli-Lebanon war (Ziadeh, 2010).

In 2006, the rekindling of diplomatic relations between Syria and the newly established, U.S.-supported government in Iraq, coupled with the sectarian violence instigated by al Qaeda, resulted in a geopolitical shift that favored Syrian interests, particularly as the U.S. scaled back its

objectives and the pro-Iranian Daawa party, an ally of Syria, gained prominence in Iraqi politics (Reilly, 2018). This sequence of developments suggests that Bashar al-Assad effectively navigated through the various crises he encountered, particularly in the initial years following the turn of the millennium, thereby managing to mitigate some of the negative perceptions of his leadership. Moreover, the economic initiatives undertaken to enhance ties with Turkey, highlighted by Assad's 2004 visit to Ankara, can be construed as a strategic effort to project the image of a comparatively moderate administration, one more inclined towards fostering regional relationships, in contrast to the more rigid approach traditionally associated with his father's regime. Through a mix of caution, pragmatism, and stubbornness, Bashar al-Assad seamlessly assumed his father's role, successfully navigating the overlapping challenges of his initial six years in power, gaining domestic and regional popularity by standing firm against Washington and Israel, thereby setting the stage for subsequent rewards (McHugo, 2014).

In 2007, Bashar al-Assad emerged as president once again, being the sole candidate in the election. Amidst a context where political opponents were marginalized, imprisoned, or exiled, and coupled with enhanced international and regional relationships, a superficial layer of prosperity in major cities, and global recognition for its state-supported cultural initiatives and tourism prospects, Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle could have perceived the conclusion of the first decade of the twenty-first century as a triumphant milestone (Reilly, 2018).

During this period, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. In a move that was seen as counter to U.S. efforts to diplomatically isolate Syria, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi engaged in discussions with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that drew criticism from the White House, as it was perceived as undermining the American stance towards the Syrian government (NBC, 2007). During her meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi discussed Assad's readiness to enter peace negotiations with Israel (Shadid, 2007). Pelosi and her congressional delegation also expressed concerns about militants crossing from Syria into Iraq and the situation involving Israeli soldiers captured by Hezbollah and Hamas (Shadid, 2007). Additionally, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with the Foreign Minister of the Syrian Arab Republic Walid Moallem in Egypt. In their first high-level meeting in over two years, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Syrian Foreign Minister Mr. Moallem engaged in substantive discussions, with Ms. Rice urging Syria to

better control its border with Iraq to limit the entry of foreign fighters, a request seemingly heeded as indicated by the reported decrease in militant crossings (Cooper and Slackman, 2007).

In a significant move away from public scrutiny, real diplomatic progress was observed as Syrian President Mr. Assad and the Lebanese President, Michel Suleiman, agreed to establish embassies in each other's capitals (Voice of America, 2008). Moreover Bennhold (2008) reported that, despite Mr. Assad's avoidance of direct interaction with Israeli leader Mr. Olmert at a recent event, communication between Syria and Israel was facilitated indirectly through Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, indicating a nuanced approach to regional diplomacy. In 2008, Turkey's mediation in indirect Syria-Israel talks was halted due to Israel's military action in Gaza in December, a response to rocket attacks, which led to the discontinuation of these negotiations (McHugo, 2014).

The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2009, overcoming George W. Bush, can be viewed as another major event influencing the political history of Syria. Obama's Democratic affiliation and departure from Bush's aggressive Middle East policies were seen as a promising development, particularly in Syria, where diplomatic ties, already improving towards the end of Bush's tenure, were expected to strengthen further. The inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States in January 2009 presented an opportunity for Syria to move past the adversarial relations experienced under the George W. Bush administration, fostering optimism in Damascus for a potential enhancement of U.S.-Syrian diplomatic ties (Reilly, 2018). In his inaugural address, President Obama did not specifically focus on Middle East policy. Instead, his speech broadly emphasized themes of democracy, unity, and the enduring strength of the American Constitution. He highlighted the need for collective action to address contemporary challenges and uphold individual freedoms, stressing the importance of adapting to change while remaining faithful to foundational principles. However he stated that:

“America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe. And we will renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad, for no one has a greater stake in a peaceful world than its most powerful nation. We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom” (Barack Obama, 2009).

In February following his inauguration, the Obama administration partially lifted sanctions under the Syria Accountability Act, allowing for the supply of spare parts for Syrian Air's Boeing aircraft. This move was seen as a step towards engaging diplomatically with Syria (McHugo, 2014). In line with this, while the foundations, objectives, and direction of Obama's Middle East policy were not distinctly outlined in his inaugural address, they became more discernible in his speech addressed to the Islamic world in Cairo, Egypt, on June 4, 2009. President Obama's Cairo speech in June 2009, delivered just five months into his tenure, utilized his unique rhetorical skills and the transformative symbol of his presidency to foster a message of peace and cooperation with the Muslim world, advocating for mutual respect, tolerance, and democratic values, and uniquely referencing Islamic teachings to align with these principles (Packer, 2014).

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in an interview with the Guardian, expressed optimism for improved U.S.-Syria relations post-Bush era, anticipating the appointment of a U.S. ambassador to Damascus as part of Barack Obama's diplomatic engagement strategy, and expressed his desire for the U.S. to lead the Middle East peace process (Black, 2009). However Assad in his interview with the Guardian asserted that the decision to appoint a Syrian ambassador to Lebanon is a sovereign matter and will not be swayed by external pressures from the US, Britain, or any European countries (Black, 2009). This era also saw heightened engagements, including high-level visits from the United States. George Mitchell, Barack Obama's special envoy, during his Damascus visit, stressed the U.S. commitment to achieving a comprehensive Middle East peace, including normalised relations between Israel and Arab states, and highlighted positive discussions with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Syria's vital role in this process, as part of a broader U.S. strategy to foster regional peace and stability, acknowledging Syria's influence through its support for Hamas and Hezbollah (Associated Press, 2009). In 2010, the first ambassador Robert Ford since 2005 took his post in Damascus. Despite some in the Bush administration advocating for Assad's overthrow or behavioral change, concerns existed about potential regional instability or an Islamist regime in Syria, a policy division that resurfaced in 2011 (Lesch, 2012).

4.3 Navigating the Complexities of Euro-Syrian Relations: From the Damascus Spring to Renewed Diplomatic Engagement

It would not be inaccurate to suggest that following the thirty-year authoritarian reign of Hafez al-Assad, the ascendancy of Bashar al-Assad, who was educated in Europe, generated expectations of a positive trajectory in relations with Europe. This anticipation stemmed from signals of respect for human rights and Westernization that were apparent in the early period of his presidency. The EU-Syria relationship, initially focused on socio-economic issues, evolved to include political aspects, leading to increased mutual distrust, especially following key events and resolutions in the mid-2000s, which influenced the fluctuating dynamics of their interactions over the past 25 years (Nacrour and Ghoury, 2022). When Bashar al-Assad took over the presidency of Syria in June 2000, several optimistic observers proclaimed the onset of a Damascus Spring (Pierini, 2014). The European Union's readiness to advance was initially met with hesitation from Syria, until President Bashar Al Assad's apparent willingness (at least rhetorically) to reform Syria's political landscape, economy, and institutions during the so-called Damascus Spring of 2000/2001, which spurred the EU to reinitiate engagement (Nacrour and Ghoury, 2022).

However, the very brief duration of the Damascus Spring, which initially raised high hopes, and the tarnishing of Bashar al-Assad's image in the West can be attributed to various factors. These include Syria's perceived support for terrorism, particularly during and before the Iraq War, especially as accused by the United States. Furthermore, the aggressive Middle East policy pursued by President George W. Bush's administration further isolated Syria.

The Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement, signed in 2004, represents a significant milestone in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. In an effort to mitigate external pressures, Syria sought to leverage the Syrian–European partnership agreement as a diplomatic shield against American influence, however, this strategy encountered challenges due to European rigidity on the issue of weapons of mass destruction, leading to the deferral of formalizing the agreement until October 2004 (Ziadeh, 2010). This agreement, which aligned with the goals set out in the 1995 Barcelona Declaration, aimed to enhance relations and promote regional peace and security. It also sought to boost economic ties between Syria, the EU, and other Mediterranean partners. Key elements of the agreement included commitments to democracy, human rights, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, combating terrorism, and the comprehensive elimination of tariffs on agricultural products. This agreement laid the groundwork for establishing a Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area, completing the framework proposed in the Barcelona Declaration (Commission of the European Communities, 2004). It's

worth noting that while this agreement was signed with the aim of accessing new investment sources and expanding regional market reach, it ultimately faced challenges in the ratification process, as observed by Reilly (2018).

The European Neighborhood Policy, initiated by the EU in 2004, in order to serve as a tool in its foreign relations strategy. Its primary objective is to enhance and strengthen ties between the EU and neighboring countries, with the aim of promoting stability, security, and prosperity at the EU's borders (European External Action Service, 2021). In November 2005, the European Union held a significant conference in Barcelona as part of the Barcelona Process. This event marked an important moment in the EU's relationship with its Mediterranean neighbors, including nations from North Africa and the Middle East. This conference stood out for its focus on reevaluating and revitalizing the partnership, considering recent shifts in the geopolitical landscape. These included the expansion of the European Union, the repercussions of the September 11 attacks, and escalating issues related to security and immigration. The 2005 Barcelona Conference was significantly affected by the absence of Syria and other Arab states, particularly in discussions on regional tensions and defining terrorism, where Syria's advocacy for excluding resistance against foreign occupation underscored its intricate regional dynamics and internal politics, ultimately impeding the conference's pursuit of a unified Euro-Mediterranean stance on key issues (Gillespie, 2016).

Following the Rafik Hariri assassination in 2005, Syria faced diplomatic isolation due to its alleged involvement in this event that had significant implications for the region's political landscape. Furthermore, the personal closeness between Rafik Hariri and then Prime Minister of France Jacques Chirac also influenced Syria's fate following the assassination. Chirac and Hariri were known to have a close personal relationship that went beyond mere political alliances. In the wake of Hariri's assassination, Chirac called for transparency regarding the investigation into his friend al-Hariri's death before he attended the funeral (Al Jazeera, 2005). Critics argue that Chirac's personal vendetta against Syria and his fixation on Hariri clouded his judgement, overlooking the importance of Syria's security interests in Lebanon amid the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict, which necessitates Syria's resistance to a government hostile towards it or the sway of an unfriendly foreign power (Seale, 2007). Additionally, it has been reported in various media outlets and investigations that Chirac might have received financial support from wealthy individuals, including Rafik Hariri, during his political career. These reports suggest that Hariri, a billionaire

businessman before entering Lebanese politics, may have provided financial contributions to Chirac. However, the investigation into this matter resulted in no further action. After Chirac's death in 2019, the actions taken by Lebanon under the leadership of Hariri's son and then-Prime Minister showed the long-term effects of this duo's relationship. Lebanon declared Monday a day of mourning in response to the passing of former French President Jacques Chirac, who died in Paris at the age of 86, as announced by Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri (Ya Libnan, 2019). The Prime Minister of Lebanon expressed his sorrow over the demise of Jacques Chirac on Thursday, describing him as one of the most eminent figures in France and akin to a "spiritual twin" of his father, Rafik Hariri (2019).

However, post-2007, a series of developments on the global stage provided avenues for Syria to re-emerge in international diplomacy. These developments, which included shifts in geopolitical alliances and changing priorities of major world powers, contributed to altering the diplomatic narrative around Syria. These changes enabled Syria to gradually break free from its isolation, thereby reasserting its presence and influence in international relations.

The Country Strategy Paper for Syria on March 7, 2007, focused on transitioning to a "social market economy" through Syria's 10th Five-Year Plan and outlined three main action priorities for 2007-2013:

- “(i) Support for political and administrative reform, including modernisation of the administration, decentralisation, rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights;*
- (ii) Support for economic reform, including implementation of the Five-Year Plan, preparation for the implementation of the Association Agreement and preparation for WTO accession;*
- (iii) Support for social reform, including human resources development and measures to accompany the economic transition process”* (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2007).

From 2007 to 2010, a total of EUR 130 million was allocated to aid Syria in implementing reforms across political, administrative, economic, social, and environmental sectors (European Commission, 2014).

Syria's emergence from diplomatic isolation can be understood within the context of France's role during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2008. This period was marked by a notable shift in France's Middle Eastern policy under the leadership of President Nicolas Sarkozy, distinct from the approach of his predecessor, Jacques Chirac. Sarkozy's approach towards Syria marked a departure from his predecessor Chirac's emotionally influenced stance, adopting a more rational policy that opened possibilities for dialogue, contingent upon Syria's concrete steps towards peace in Lebanon (Hershco and Shumacher, 2007). France under Sarkozy actively engaged in diplomatic efforts with Syria, including sending a special envoy to Damascus, emphasizing the need for Syrian cooperation in maintaining Lebanon's integrity and preventing arms transfer to Hizbullah (Hershco and Shumacher, 2007).

Sarkozy, in this regard, proposed a Mediterranean Union. Sarkozy's proposal for a Mediterranean Union, intended to address issues like counter-terrorism and sustainable development, was perceived as a French attempt to enhance its influence in the EU, bypassing the Barcelona process, but faced skepticism due to the undemocratic and economically challenged nature of some Mediterranean countries (Hershco, 2008). Merkel advocated for all European nations to be given the opportunity to engage with the initiative, proposing a "special partnership" for those opting not to join (Merkel, 2008). Conversely, French President Nicolas Sarkozy's vision for the Mediterranean Union was markedly distinct, aiming to establish a closer connection with the southern neighbors of Europe. Sarkozy's proposal was not intended to forge a new Europe but to address specific regional challenges through targeted cooperation on issues such as sustainable development, energy, transportation, and water (Tasche, 2010). Sarkozy's original idea for the Union for the Mediterranean, focused on countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, was modified to include all European Union members. Sarkozy also harbored ambitions for a Mediterranean monetary union, a concept that ultimately did not materialize, revealing the challenges of implementing such regional initiatives without broader consensus (Tasche, 2010). The dialogue between Merkel and Sarkozy thus encapsulates the tension between a vision for Europe that seeks to expand its influence through targeted regional partnerships and one that emphasizes the importance of unity and inclusiveness among all member states. To reconcile these differing perspectives and to facilitate cooperation between the proposed Union for the Mediterranean and the EU, the concept of the European Commission becoming a full associate was introduced. This

aimed at creating synergy effects and preventing overlap between the two unions, suggesting a collaborative framework that could accommodate both approaches (Tasche, 2010). This expansion allowed the inclusion of countries like Syria and Israel, despite their state of war, and others like Jordan, which are only marginally Mediterranean, easing the implementation of the union (Erlanger and Bennhold, 2008).

Under the shadow of the previously mentioned situations and events, the Paris Summit took place on July 13, 2008 with the attendance of Bashar Al-Assad. European authorities have refuted claims that Europe has elevated Assad from a status of “pariah” without achieving any genuine alteration in his behavior (Nakhoul, 2008). Syria's participation in the summit and the broader Barcelona Process indicated its interest in engaging with the EU. However, the complex political landscape, marked by internal governance issues and regional conflicts, posed challenges to deepening this relationship. The EU's emphasis on human rights, democracy, and rule of law often clashed with the realities of Syrian governance, impacting the progression of bilateral relations. The 2008 Paris Summit for the Mediterranean, under the co-presidency of France and Egypt, marked a significant milestone in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Syria participated at this summit, which sought to redouble efforts to turn the Mediterranean into a region of harmony, democracy, collaboration, and prosperity (Council of the European Union, 2008). The leaders at the summit underscored the importance of regional integration and cohesion, addressing challenges such as economic and social development, environmental degradation, energy, and migration (Council of the European Union, 2008).

Syria's position appeared strengthened following the series of events culminating in the Paris Summit, and there were indications of optimism regarding the eventual ratification of the yet-to-be ratified Association Agreement with the European Union. In this context, French President Nicolas Sarkozy's visit to Syria in September 2008 was a noteworthy diplomatic gesture, signaling potential progress in Euro-Syrian relations. Nicolas Sarkozy, as the EU President and French leader, marked a diplomatic shift by visiting Damascus and engaging with Bashar al-Assad, breaking away from the isolationist stance of his predecessor Jacques Chirac and the US, with the goal of advancing peace talks between Israel and Syria, despite facing domestic protests and the need to persuade Assad for concessions to gain broader EU support, especially from Britain and Germany (Black, 2008).

4.4 The Syrian Crisis: From Peaceful Protests to Prolonged Conflict

The Arab Spring, initiated by protests in Tunisia in 2010, aimed to dismantle long-standing despotic regimes and address the severe living conditions they had imposed. This movement, characterized by anti-government demonstrations, strikes, and at times armed conflict, rapidly spread across the Middle East and North Africa, significantly impacting Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Each region experienced unique outcomes, but a common consequence was the profound and irreversible transformation of political, social, and economic dynamics. Syria, with its distinct geopolitical position, demographic structure, and political dynamics, became a focal point. The movement there, starting on March 15, 2011, with the aim of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad, escalated from peaceful protests to armed resistance. Contrary to international expectations of a swift regime change, Assad has maintained power.

On February 22, 2011, a group of young teenagers spray-painted anti-government slogans on a school wall, leading to the arrest of several teenagers, including those children, in the subsequent days. Subsequent to their apprehension, the children were transported to Damascus for interrogation, where it is suspected that they might have been subjected to torture. It can be argued that this incident ignited a series of more severe events, serving as the catalyst for the onset of the Syrian Spring. On March 18th, in response to the detention of the children, people took to the streets demanding their release and began protesting against the government's actions. Additionally, voices rose calling for justice, law, freedom, an end to corruption, and democracy, transcending the initial demand for the children's release. The government's response to these protests was characterized by extreme aggression in its efforts to suppress them. The Syrian government's severe response to the protests in Daraa, involving the use of live ammunition and arrests, only intensified the public's fury, transforming localized demonstrations into a national movement demanding political reforms and the end of Assad's rule (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The Syrian Revolution was ignited by the Arab Spring movements, leveraging media and internet for organization and communication among activists, driven by longstanding public discontent with the Ba'ath party and Al-Assad's rule, and supported by the involvement and international advocacy of the Syrian diaspora (Fares, 2015).

Two weeks after the protests broke out Assad finally took a step and showed himself. He addressed the Syrian people on March 30th. The speech, delivered by a Syrian leader to the People's Assembly, addressed the challenges and conditions in Syria and the region. It emphasized pride in the resilience and unity of the Syrian people in the face of repeated tests and conspiracies against the country. Assad expressed sorrow for the loss of life and reiterated the responsibility to ensure national security and stability. The speech acknowledged the need for reform and development amidst internal and external pressures, differentiating between genuine calls for change and elements of sedition. It reaffirmed Syria's commitment to national rights, independence, and support for Arab resistance, linking domestic and foreign policies to the welfare of the Syrian citizen. He concluded his speech saying:

“Since some people have short memory, I will refresh their memory once again by saying that not all of what is happening is a conspiracy, because I know that they are on the ready in their studios to comment; As for you, children of this great nation, your love for your country which you express day after day and which is clearer than ever at times of crisis, and which you particularly expressed yesterday through your unprecedented mass demonstrations throughout the country gives me more confidence and determination. Your solidarity and unity in fighting sedition assures me about the future and if you, in the slogans you chanted, expressed willingness to sacrifice yourselves for your president, the more natural thing is for the president to sacrifice himself for his people and homeland. I shall remain the faithful brother and comrade who will walk with his people and lead them to build the Syria we love, the Syria we are proud of, the Syria which is invincible to its enemies.” (Bashar Al-Assad, 2011).

In response to escalating protests, the Syrian government, lacking a coordinated strategy, implemented superficial reforms such as replacing the governor of Der’a, granting citizenship to certain Kurds, and lifting the veil ban for women teachers, targeting specific groups like the people of Der’a, Kurds, and Wahhabi Islamists, in an attempt to gain favor rather than enact genuine reform, but these actions failed to quell the intensifying and spreading demonstrations (McHugo, 2014). Assad's initial promises of political reforms and the subsequent lifting of the state of emergency in response to public demands failed to yield any significant results (Van Hüllen,

2015). As the government continued its brutal crackdown, peaceful demonstrations rapidly evolved into an anti-regime stance.

The violent suppression led to an armed struggle, symbolizing a shift from protest to civil war. Defections from the Syrian army were key, forming the foundation of the Free Syrian Army, aimed at overthrowing Assad (Human Rights Watch, 2011). However, the different structures and organizations of the militaries in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, where the military leadership chose not to oppose the populace and ultimately sacrificed their leaders to preserve power, contrasted with the situation in Syria, where at least part of the military remained loyal to Assad and resolutely confronted the uprising (Van Hüllen, 2015). The Syrian regime's harsh response to the 2011 protests demonstrated its determination to quash resistance, underscored by the unwavering loyalty of its military, party, and government apparatus (Lesch, 2012). The Syrian authorities began a sequential crackdown on protesting cities, starting with Deraa and moving to Banyas and Latakia between March and June 2011, eventually deploying the full force of the army against demonstrators, as evidenced by amateur footage of tanks and military equipment in the cities (Fares, 2015). They also severed utilities and communication links in these areas.

This harsh crackdown led some protester factions to arm themselves in opposition to the security forces. In June, the Syrian military's advance into the town of Jisr al-Shugūr prompted thousands of residents to flee to Turkey as refugees. The Syrian revolution saw an increase in religious elements, including the rise of Islamic rhetoric and the involvement of religious groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda affiliates, partly due to a lack of international support and strategic affiliations (Fares, 2015). From November 2011, the PYD gradually took control over Kurdish regions in Syria, with Kurdish parties distancing themselves from the Syrian opposition due to their focus on Kurdish rights and concerns over Islamist and Arab nationalist dominance in opposition groups (Reilly, 2018).

Throughout most of 2011, Syria's internal and external opposition remained disorganized and divided without clear leadership, a situation perpetuated by the regime's strategies over the years (Lesch, 2012). The FSA emerged from increasing army defections, forming an umbrella body for opposition fighters with diverse funding sources and ideologies, leading to operational independence among various brigades (Fares, 2015; Reilly, 2018). As demands for Assad's resignation grew, the protests in Syria became more radicalized, leading to an armed uprising by June and the eventual evolution into a full-blown civil war. The struggle continued in many forms

despite the emergence of the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council in mid-2011, which did nothing to unite the opposition. (Van Hüllen, 2015). Influenced by the Libyan revolution, Syrian revolutionaries replaced the official state flag with the "independence flag" on November 18, 2011, symbolizing their separation from the government (Fares, 2015).

By early 2012, protests in Syria had begun to approach the central areas of Damascus and Aleppo, indicating a spread of unrest to the country's core regions (Lesch, 2012). In January 2012, al Qaeda in Iraq sent fighters, including Syrians released by Assad, into Syria to establish the Nusra Front (Reilly, 2018). In February 2012, the Assad government introduced a new constitution, which in less turbulent times might have been seen as a step towards political liberalization, including provisions for contested presidential elections and new political parties (Reilly, 2018). The Assad regime's efforts to quell the unrest in the country continued to yield no results in terms of calming the crisis. The year 2012 also marked the transformation of what could previously be described as protests, uprisings, or internal disturbances into a profound civil war. In this context, the emergence and/or development of various externally supported factions such as the Free Syrian Army, the "Syrian Salvation Government," "Tahrir al-Sham," the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," and the "Syrian Democratic Forces" intensified incidents of armed conflict and bombings within the country.

It would be inaccurate to interpret the series of events that started as peaceful protests and rapidly escalated into internal conflicts and ultimately a civil war, solely in the context of Syria's internal dynamics. In this regard, while it is a clear fact that Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Turkey actively supported anti-government groups, on the other hand, it can be said that Iraq, Iran, and Russia, along with the Lebanese Hezbollah, took positions in support of the Assad regime. Frustrated by the initial lack of foreign support, Syrian rebels in southern Turkey witnessed a significant shift as Turkey began supplying light arms and training, while the U.S. facilitated the transfer of Gulf-purchased weapons to the opposition, marking a strategic escalation in international involvement in the Syrian conflict (Warrick, 2011). Senior American officials have reported that Iran has recommenced the transportation of military equipment to Syria via Iraqi airspace, in a renewed attempt to strengthen the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria (Gordon, 2012). The Syrian rebels' dependence on external supply lines for arms and ammunition is crucial to proceed undermining Assad's command, yet the rise of terrorist cells associated with Al-Qaeda opposing Assad not only presents a danger to the United States but also challenges the

notion of material support for the armed opposition, as increasing regime firepower heightens the risk of radicalization among militias and potential alliances with Al-Qaeda for advanced weaponry, echoing the situation in Iraq during 2005-2006; hence, the United States faces the imperative to differentiate between Syria's political expatriates and the armed opposition, with American goals focused on accelerating Assad's downfall, containing regional conflict repercussions, and influencing the post-Assad governance structure, necessitating strategic engagement with key factions of Syria's armed opposition to align shared objectives and manage potential outcomes of the regime's collapse or the conflict's prolongation (Holliday, 2012).

The Syrian government's deployment of chemical weapons in Ghouta in August 2013 catalyzed an international crisis, challenging President Obama's previous warning that such an act would cross a 'red line' and trigger US intervention, yet the actual response revealed the ineffectiveness of this warning as a deterrent; Obama, facing difficulty in garnering support from a Congress and public hesitant about further Middle Eastern entanglements, accepted a Russian proposal to collaboratively oversee the accounting and elimination of Syria's chemical arsenal, allowing him to retreat from the politically precarious decision of intervening in the Syrian conflict, while enabling Russia to safeguard its ally, the Assad government, through participation in an internationally sanctioned disarmament process (Reilly, 2018). By 2013, al Qaeda in Iraq had evolved into the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), gaining control in parts of Syrian Jazira and northwest Iraq following the 2011 US military withdrawal (Reilly, 2018). By 2014, ISIS had emerged as a dominant force, capturing large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. In June 2014, ISIS captured Mosul and much of Iraq's Sunni Arab region, already controlling parts of Syrian Jazira and Raqqa, and declared a 'caliphate' with Raqqa as its capital, erasing the Iraq-Syria border and brutally targeting minorities (Reilly, 2018). This led to a significant international response, with a U.S.-led coalition launching airstrikes against ISIS targets. To formally address the growing danger posed by ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, the U.S. Department of Defense formed the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) on October 17, 2014 (Dominique, 2015). Kurdish forces, particularly the YPG, also played a crucial role in battling ISIS.

Russia's direct military intervention in 2015 to support President Bashar al-Assad significantly altered the course of the war. Russian air support helped the Syrian government reclaim large areas from rebel and jihadist groups. In 2015, Russia's decision to intervene in Syria was influenced by a unique combination of political motivations, such as the imminent threat of

the Assad regime's collapse, significant security implications of this outcome, and the ineffectiveness of diplomacy, alongside necessary operational preconditions like air access and ground allies, contrasting with its more limited involvement in other conflicts like Yemen due to lower threat levels and geopolitical benefits, and while similar extensive intervention in Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan seems unlikely, circumstances akin to those in Syria, such as an ISIS advance in northern Afghanistan, could potentially escalate Russian involvement (Charap, Treyger and Geist, 2019). From 2016 onwards, the Syrian government, with Russian and Iranian support, managed to recapture significant territories, including key cities like Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta. Rebel-held areas were increasingly confined to Idlib province and parts of the north under Turkish influence.

In 2017, a series of events significantly altered the stagnation and dynamics of the war; the first being the attack by armed rebel groups on Hama in March, followed by the United States' missile strike targeting the Syrian army's Shayrat airbase. In April 2017, a chlorine gas attack in Khan Shaykhun near Aleppo led to a retaliatory strike by the US on a Syrian airbase; however, at that stage, such a singular military response from the US was insufficient to alter the overall dynamics of the war (Reilly, 2018).

From 2015 to 2017, developments effectively secured the Assad regime's survival with opposition militias confined to isolated rural areas, notably challenged by al Qaeda's affiliate in Idlib/Zawiya, leading to diminished Western support due to concerns over aid reaching al Qaeda, culminating in July 2017 with U.S. President Trump halting funding for Syria's militant opposition to focus on ISIS, while the anti-Assad coalition weakened, evidenced by Turkey's disagreement with U.S. Kurdish support and Saudi Arabia's blockade against Qatar for backing Muslim Brotherhood-linked forces, ultimately leaving the Assad regime in control of all major cities and 80% of the population, and uniquely benefiting from robust international and regional alliances, in contrast to the fragmented opposition (Reilly, 2018). Despite the Syrian government's military successes, the conflict remained in a political deadlock with occasional flare-ups of violence, particularly in Idlib. International diplomatic efforts, such as the Astana talks and UN-mediated Geneva talks, have made limited progress in finding a political solution. The situation was complicated by issues like the Kurdish question, the future of displaced people and refugees, reconstruction challenges, and lingering ISIS cells.

4.5 The European Union's Response to the Syrian Conflict: From Diplomatic Initiatives to Strategic Challenges

In the Syrian conflict, the European Union, along with the United States and other global actors, faced challenges in formulating a unified strategy, leading to the adoption of sanctions as a primary response, which included arms embargoes, visa bans, asset freezes, and restrictions on the Syrian energy sector, finance, and trade (Lehne, 2012). The European Union's approach to conflict management in its neighboring regions has been marked by hesitation and indecision, raising doubts about the commitment of its member states to the EU's declared security objectives for itself and its neighbors (Noutcheva, 2015).

In March 2011, the European Union initially issued a declaration addressing the events occurring in Syria, where it can be said that a passive stance was taken, as articulated by High Representative Catherine Ashton; this declaration outlined the EU's concerns about the situation in Syria and highlighted its expectations from the country.

‘The EU expresses its profound concern and strongly condemns the violent repression, including through the use of live ammunition, of peaceful protests in various locations across Syria in recent days resulting in the death of several demonstrators, wounded persons and arbitrary detentions, which is unacceptable;

The EU calls on the Syrian authorities to refrain from using violence and to listen to the legitimate aspirations of the people and address them through inclusive political dialogue and genuine reforms and not through repression.;

The EU expects that the Investigation Committee created by the Ministry of Interior after the violent repression in the city of Daraa will ensure that those responsible for the death and injury of peaceful protestors are held accountable;

The EU calls on the Syrian authorities to respect its international commitments to human rights and fundamental freedoms’’ (European Union, 2011).

In May 2011, the European Commission published a document titled "A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood" in response to evolving events. The document highlighted the

European Union's renewed approach towards its neighboring countries, particularly in response to various challenges and developments in the region, including the situation in Syria. Driven by recent regional events, including the situation in Syria, the EU aims to more effectively and integratively strengthen its relationships with neighboring countries, including Syria, through a comprehensive review and adaptation of the ENP, enhancing cooperation and assistance across various policy fields, acknowledging limited results in supporting political reforms, emphasizing mutual accountability and a commitment to universal values like human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, while intending to maintain open dialogue channels with governments, civil society, and other stakeholders to support the central objectives of the ENP (European Commission, 2011). Moreover, the EU will adjust its support based on each partner's progress in political reforms and building deep democracy that includes promoting a functioning democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. Elements essential for deep democracy include free and fair elections, freedom of association, expression, and assembly, a free press, an independent judiciary, the right to a fair trial, anti-corruption measures, and reform in security and law enforcement sectors (European Commission, 2011).

Furthermore, the European Union, decided to impose a series stringent sanctions in May 2011. This was formalised through Council Regulations (EU) No 442/2011 and No 611/2011. These measures included a comprehensive arms embargo, prohibiting the sale of arms and equipment that could be used for internal repression. Additionally, the sanctions targeted specific individuals and entities, imposing travel bans and freezing their assets, directly holding those responsible for the repression accountable. The overarching goal of these sanctions was to curb the Syrian government's ability to inflict violence on protestors and to push for a peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict (Council of the European Union, 2011a, 2011b).

On May 2012, the European Union strongly condemned the Assad regime's human rights violations, called for President Assad's resignation, suspended cooperation and imposed sanctions, while maintaining humanitarian aid for the Syrian people and coordinating international mediation efforts (European Commission, 2012). The hesitation of EU member states to delegate authority to the European level and their selective approach in doing so restricts the range of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) actions to those already effectively implemented within the EU, thus, the expansion of these policy measures is only successful when member states collectively recognize a strong mutual interest in adopting new policies (Tömmel, 2013). In stark contrast to

its approach in Syria, where the European Union largely depended on sanctions while the situation deteriorated, it lacked a political strategy to effectively address the crisis (Lehne, 2012). During 2012 the EU continued intensifying sanction against the so called 'regime' Council Regulation (EU) No 168/2012, dated 27 February 2012, represents a key amendment to the earlier Regulation (EU) No 36/2012, intensifying the restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria. These amendments included prohibitions on trading gold, precious metals, and diamonds with the Syrian government, its bodies, or entities controlled by them. Moreover, the regulation imposed restrictions on the Central Bank of Syria, reflecting the EU's commitment to applying economic pressure to address the ongoing conflict in Syria (Council of the European Union, 2012a, 2012b). While the European Union's sanctions against Syria are economically impactful, their effectiveness in influencing behavioral change among the targeted individuals, particularly those in power, is questionable (Lehne, 2012).

In 2013, Western-imposed sanctions significantly impacted Syria's economy by halting its major oil exports, leading to severe gasoline shortages and long queues at gas stations, which in turn made it difficult for taxi drivers to sustain their livelihoods due to increased fuel costs and extended travel times; concurrently, the conflict damaged domestic factories and infrastructure, with rebels targeting electrical stations and power lines, resulting in frequent outages, and the withdrawal of the Syrian army from certain regions led to local tribes, extreme Islamist groups, and the PYD vying for control over the unguarded oil wells (Erlich, 2014). Despite the EU's implementation of assertive restrictive measures against Syria, these actions have not led to the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad, nor have they clearly advanced the EU's values, norms, and principles in the region. The agreement on these sanctions emerged as the lowest common denominator among EU governments, and the process of their adoption, including the lifting of the arms embargo on Syria, highlighted differing perspectives within the EU on engagement with the Syrian regime and the potential regional and domestic consequences (Shumacher, 2015).

It would be accurate to claim that alongside the European Union's collective policy and responses, individual member countries also took independent actions. In this context, France, under the leadership of Sarkozy, undertook various initiatives. These national-level actions complemented the broader efforts of the EU and highlighted the diverse approaches within the Union in addressing the situation. After days of intense diplomatic negotiations in New York aimed at ceasing the lethal 10-month suppression of anti-government protests in Syria, the Russian

Federation and China exercised their veto power in the Security Council, blocking a draft resolution that called for an immediate cessation of violence and reprisals by all involved parties in Syria, including government forces and armed opposition groups consequently, the rejection of the resolution by the Russian Federation and China was met with strong disapproval from the three other permanent members of the Council — France, the United Kingdom, and the United States — who were united in their belief that the proposed text offered the most balanced compromise (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2012). Taking inspiration from the Libya Contact Group, established in March 2011 with the objective of overthrowing Moammar al-Gaddafi and later renamed Friends of the New Libya, officials in Tunisia adopted the designation “Friends of Syria” for their collective (Lund, 2017).

In 2013, the European Union faced internal dissent and debates due to the ineffectiveness of its sanctions against Syria, combined with the desire of some EU member states to actively support opposition groups in the conflict zone, leading to the emergence of divergent opinions within the Union. Following the failure of the EU foreign ministers to reach a consensus on renewing the arms embargo against the Syrian opposition, the embargo effectively expired, thus legally opening the door for member states to consider the option of arming the Syrian opposition, turning it into a matter of considerable interest (Anatolian Agency, 2013). Countries such as the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Sweden expressed skepticism over assurances by Britain and France that they could ensure arms supplied to Syrian rebels would only reach moderate groups and not radical Islamists (Marcus, 2013). The European Union remained divided in its approach, with concerns that failure to reach a consensus might result in the lapse of not only the arms embargo but all EU sanctions against the Syrian regime, compelling individual governments to hastily impose their own sanctions (Marcus, 2013). The United Kingdom secured a significant alteration in EU policy by advocating for the relaxation of the arms embargo on Syria, a decision that, despite opposition from the majority of EU member states, was ultimately accepted to maintain an appearance of collective policy coherence within the Union (Traynor, 2013).

It can be argued that the emergence of ISIS in 2014 and its military gains in Syria and Iraq led to a shift in the European Union's approach to the crisis. In April 2012, before the rise of ISIS, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE allocated \$100 million for the salaries of Syrian rebel fighters, representing external intervention that paralleled support for the Syrian regime from Iran and Arab Shiite factions, including Hizbullah and Iraq's Shiite majority

(McHugo, 2014). This financial involvement of regional powers, driven by sectarian motives rather than humanitarian concerns, further transformed the Syrian conflict into an arena for foreign geopolitical interests (McHugo, 2014). On October 20, 2014, the EU Foreign Affairs Council emphasized the need for a holistic approach to address the ISIS threat, delegating the responsibility to the European Commission and the High Representative/Vice President to develop a detailed regional strategy (Koenig, 2018). In 2015, the European Union's regional strategy for Syria, as outlined in the Council conclusions, emphasized a comprehensive approach to countering ISIL/Da'esh which included supporting a political transition in Syria and fostering inclusive governance in Iraq, recognizing that such political changes are essential for lasting peace and stability in the region. The EU condemned the human rights violations by ISIL/Da'esh and other terrorist groups, stressing the need for a balanced approach that combines military action with political solutions and humanitarian aid (Council of the European Union, 2015).

The document "European Council Conclusions – 15 October 2015" (European Council, 2015) details the decisions and agreements made by the European Council on various issues, including the response to the Syrian crisis. The Council emphasizes the importance of a political transition in Syria, the need for a unified approach to migration, and the role of Turkey in managing the refugee crisis. As the threat of ISIS, evidenced by bombings in European cities, escalated, the European countries shifted their focus, de-prioritizing the combat against Assad's regime in Syria and recognizing the persistence of Assad's government as a relatively lesser issue compared to the immediate dangers posed by ISIS-affiliated militants (Shoup, 2018). In 2014, concerns about Islamic terrorism in Europe escalated due to a series of terrorist attacks. By November 2015, the issue was highlighted by Swedish MEP Kristina Winberg, who presented a parliamentary question linking the increase in terrorism with the surge in migration to Europe. She inquired about the number of ISIS terrorists entering Europe among asylum-seekers, the measures to prevent ISIS terrorists from exploiting migration flows to enter Europe, and actions against 'foreign fighters' returning to the EU from Syria (Kristina Winberg, 2015).

From 2016 to 2022, the European Union's response to the Syrian crisis has been multifaceted, encompassing humanitarian aid, political engagement, and the implementation of sanctions. In 2016, the EU's focus shifted significantly due to the escalating threat posed by ISIS, leading to an EU-Turkey agreement aimed at managing the flow of migrants and refugees. Furthermore, these sanctions are reviewed annually, with the EU remaining committed to a lasting

and credible political solution to the Syrian conflict, based on UN Security Council resolutions and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.

In 2016, the influx of tens of thousands of irregular migrants fleeing Syria, using Turkey as a transit point to Europe, led to the emergence of a migration crisis within the European Union. On March 18, 2016, the European Council and Turkey reached an agreement aimed at curbing irregular migration from Turkey to the EU. The deal included returning new irregular migrants from the Greek islands to Turkey, a one-for-one resettlement scheme for Syrian refugees, measures to prevent new migration routes, activation of a humanitarian admission scheme, acceleration of visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, expedited disbursement of EU funding for refugees in Turkey, re-energizing EU accession talks with Turkey, and cooperation to improve conditions in Syria (European Council, 2016). The EU's strategy has also involved substantial financial commitments, with over €3 billion pledged to assist the Syrian people at the 'Supporting Syria and the region' conference in London (UK Government, 2016).

As of right now, the Assad regime in Syria faces three main internal enemies: the radical Salafist groups, such as the more radical ISIS and the al-Qaida-affiliated Nusra Front, which entered the country in 2013–14 and took control of the area around Raqqa in eastern Syria; other Islamist opposition factions that have made Idlib in northern Syria their stronghold, challenging both the regime and the Kurds, with al-Nusra now based there after splitting from al-Qaeda and renaming as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham; and the Kurdish groups, mostly in northeast Syria, namely the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Defense Units (YPG), which in 2015 formed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alongside smaller Arab factions, primarily to combat Salafi (Levallois et al., 2023).

5 Conclusion

This research aims to trace the European influences in the political history of Syria. In doing so, it undertakes a chronological examination of political history, starting from the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and continuing to the present day, in order to analyse the footprints of Europe in the shaping of Syrian political history, while acknowledging the challenges and conflicts that have arisen from this engagement. Equally important to the analysis, I recognize the potential for future cooperation and mutual understanding, premised on a comprehensive and nuanced appreciation of the historical legacies and contemporary realities that shape Syria-European

relations. The path forward, filled with complexities, presents opportunities for constructive engagement, underscoring the importance of dialogue, diplomacy, and a commitment to addressing the multifaceted challenges that define the Syria-European nexus in the 21st century.

The critical examination of the profound impact of European involvement in Syria's political landscape from the early 20th century to present times highlights the legacy that has shaped Syria's journey through conflict and engagement. The foundational period of European influence was marked by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the French Mandate (1919-1946), which not only entrenched European geopolitical interests in Syria but also sowed enduring seeds of division, as evidenced by the work of Seale (1989) and Hinnebusch (2014). Although the process leading up to 1946 identified Europe's traces in Syrian political history as opportunistic strategic moves taken with an imperialist and colonialist appetite, Europe's contributions, especially France's, during the Syrian mandate period in terms of technical, military, education, infrastructure, and superstructure, have not been denied.

Parallel to French endeavors, British involvement in the region, while less direct, significantly influenced the geopolitical and socio-political landscape of Syria. Through strategic alliances and promises to Arab tribes, Britain sought to secure its imperial interests, including access to key resources and geopolitical dominance in the Middle East. It was found that World War II, originating in Europe, accelerated Syria's attainment of independence, even while it was not yet independent and had become a mostly passive battlefield reflecting the struggles between France and Britain.

These early interactions laid the basis for what can be seen as a highly complex relationship characterized by colonial ambitions, political manoeuvrings, and the shaping of Syria's socio-political identity, leading to persistent challenges in national unity and sovereignty. Although Europe could not become a primary actor in the political scene after its independence in 1946, during the Cold War period, and the subsequent multipolar period, it was in a position important enough to affect and has affected Syria's political scene.

European powers lost their former influence and power in the global political scene during the Cold War, with decolonization and the destruction caused by World War II. Consequently, forming a power vacuum, it positioned itself alongside America. Thus, European states becoming NATO members and American policies in the region, not in favour of Syria, forced Syria into cooperation with the USSR. The post-independence era saw a shift from direct colonial control to

more subtle forms of European influence amid the Cold War dynamics, where Syria's strategic significance drew varied European interests. This period underscored Syria's geopolitical importance and its attempts to navigate the bipolar world order, often aligning with the Soviet Union as a counterbalance to Western influence (Einstad and Pollack, 2001; Leverett, 2006).. The leadership of Hafez al-Assad further exemplified Syria's strategic role in regional conflicts and its impact on European policy, particularly during the Arab-Israeli wars and the subsequent revaluation of European Middle Eastern policy, as discussed by Shlaim (1996) and Rogan (2017). Additionally, and equally important, another reason is the issue of Israel. European states' pro-Israel policies (or Syria's perception of it) and their failure to support Syria financially and militarily in times of crisis have pushed Syria into a more distrustful and non-cooperative stance towards Europe, clearly visible during the 1956 Suez Crisis.

By the 1970s, in my opinion, the most significant event was the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Although it did not achieve a military gain, the strategic collaborations and policies of Syria under Hafez al-Assad's leadership led to a profound oil crisis affecting the Western World. This result is important in showing that Syria had the sovereignty to significantly impact European states in the region and on the international stage. This process also saw an incomplete and partly successful engagement between Europe and Syria. This is important because firstly, Europe, in its efforts to act as a union in foreign relations, has not been able to show full decisiveness due to its internal competitions, and secondly, Europe, while attempting to export democratization and liberalization policies, has either misunderstood or ignored Syria's internal dynamics. Supporting this, it can be argued that Syria, still growing at the time, was prone to sectarian power struggles incited and fueled by France, among others. Moreover, while economic liberalization in the Syrian context has led to further corruption, democratization has been a process providing opportunities for various groups to establish their own authorities in pursuit of power. Certainly, it would be incorrect to solely blame one side.

Alongside the problems in Europe's approach to Syria, Hafez al-Assad's process of autocratization has concentrated power in the hands of a specific ethnic group and has been intolerant of differing opinions in politics, as seen in the Hama example, not hesitating to suppress any different political movement with military force, even at the cost of civilian lives. Furthermore, in my opinion, Europe's inability to play a major role in shaping Syria's political history under Hafez al-Assad's leadership stemmed from the difference in Europe's approach to Middle East

cooperation compared to the USSR's. Europe's gradual cooperation policy based on development and progress was less appealing than cooperation with the USSR, which pursued purely strategic goals and was less concerned with Syria's internal affairs.

The early years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency marked a brief phase of optimism in Euro-Syrian relations, quickly overshadowed by a return to authoritarianism and diplomatic isolation following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005. Efforts to re-engage Syria, notably through the Union for the Mediterranean under President Nicolas Sarkozy, highlighted the complexities of European-Syrian relations and the internal divisions within Europe itself. The fleeting optimism towards relations with Europe with Bashar al-Assad's rise to power is due to reasons similar to those previously listed. Bashar al-Assad, in my opinion, has struggled to deal with his father's elite and the crises created by Syrian state policies have hindered engagement. Furthermore, the inherently diverse and vocal Syrian political scene erupted with every bit of hope for democratization provided by the authoritarian regime, further radicalizing Assad. This period of tentative rapprochement highlighted the complexities of Euro-Syrian relations, wherein strategic interests occasionally necessitated engagement with Assad's regime despite ongoing concerns about human rights and regional stability (Hershco and Shumacher, 2007; Bennhold, 2008; Black, 2008).

Overall, this research has exposed the multifaceted implications of European involvement in Syria, from colonial legacies to contemporary challenges, and the enduring significance of Syria in the geopolitical and strategic calculus of Europe. This research revealed how historical patterns of influence and intervention have continued to influence Syria's political trajectory and its relations with European powers. Syria's critical role in the geopolitical fabric of the Middle East has positioned the nation at the heart of a region rife with conflicts and strategic interests.

Despite not being as resource rich as some of its neighbours, Syria's economic significance has been seen to be undeniable, particularly in agriculture, industry, and as a critical trade conduit before the outbreak of the civil war. This economic role is entangled with geopolitical significance and Syria's borders with Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon. Its political landscape has been profoundly shaped by its military alliances, notably with Soviet Russia during the Cold War, Iran after the revolution, and more recently, Russia during the civil war. These alliances reflect Syria's strategic approach to its foreign policy, one that is not exclusively aligned with Western or European interests, a foreign policy which highlights the importance of Syria in the regional and

global arena, especially in terms of security dynamics, where its role is amplified by its involvement in various conflicts and as a battleground against terrorist organizations like ISIS.

In recent decades, particularly with the onset of the Syrian Civil War, the complexity of Syria-EU relations has been starkly evident. This period has tested the limits of European influence and engagement, challenging the European Union to navigate a response to a multifaceted crisis that encompasses humanitarian, security, and political dimensions. Despite substantial efforts, the EU's role has been marked by both commitment and constraint, reflecting the inherent challenges of influencing outcomes within such a protracted conflict. The EU's response, characterized by sanctions, diplomatic initiatives, and humanitarian aid, underscored the limitations of its influence in resolving the conflict. Despite substantial financial commitments and efforts to broker a political solution, the EU faced criticism for its inability to effectively mitigate the crisis or influence the Assad regime's behavior significantly.

The Syrian civil war, also has had profound implications beyond its borders, triggering a massive refugee crisis and becoming a focal point for international counterterrorism efforts. The war has not only affected neighboring countries and Europe but has also highlighted Syria's central role in discussions on migration, refugee resettlement, and humanitarian aid. Moreover, the conflict has become a proxy battleground for various international powers, including the US, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, reflecting broader geopolitical tensions and competing interests in the region.

Looking towards the future, the trajectory of Syria-European relations remains contingent upon a myriad of factors, most importantly the resolution of the Syrian conflict, the evolving geopolitical environment, and the capacity of both Syria and European entities to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation. The potential for renewed engagement, particularly in the context of post-conflict reconstruction and political reform, offers a pathway towards a more stable and cooperative relationship, albeit one that will require significant efforts to reconcile the complex legacy of past interactions with the aspirations for a more constructive future partnership.

European Union should aim for a more unified and coherent strategy towards Syria that aligns the different interests of EU member states with a common set of objectives. This strategy should balance political, humanitarian, and security interests, ensuring a coordinated approach to sanctions, diplomatic efforts, and aid. In light of these complexities, Europe would benefit from

fostering improved relations with Syria, acknowledging its capacity to influence the political and crisis trajectories in the Middle East.

As Syria transitions into post-conflict recovery in the future, studies could focus on the role of European countries in reconstruction efforts. This includes examining potential models for cooperation, investment, and the rebuilding of Syria's infrastructure, as well as how these efforts could influence political arrangements and power distributions within Syria. Future research could explore the implications of the Syrian crisis on European security and migration policies. This includes the impact of Syrian refugees on European societies, the challenges of integrating refugees, and the role of Syria in European counterterrorism strategies. Conducting comparative studies with other regions where European influence has been significant, to draw lessons and insights that could be applicable to the Syrian context. This could involve comparing different approaches and outcomes in conflict resolution, post-conflict reconstruction, and political engagement.

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