



International Journal of Advance Studies and Growth Evaluation

Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Assad, 2000-2010

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Article Info.

E-ISSN: **2583-6528**

Impact Factor (SJIF): **6.876**

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 16/ May/2025

Accepted: 15/June/2025

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Abstract

The Syrian Foreign Policy had a heavy imprint of personality during presidency of Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000) who was seen as a strong leader. Hafez al-Assad navigated the turbulent regional and global politics skillfully and made sure that Syrian interests were protected. It was Hafez's personality that provided Syria a steady leadership and made it a key regional player. Some of the key characteristics of his policy were anti-imperialism, close alliance with Soviet Union and staunch support to Palestinian cause. Hafez was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad in 2000. Bashar, unlike his father, was perceived to be a soft spoken, liberal kind of person. It was expected that he would reconfigure the approach of Syrian foreign policy towards West and would normalize ties with Israel. The foreign policy approach of Bashar al-Assad, however, was not on expected lines. He shaped the Syrian foreign policy in a manner that had a considerable influence of his personality and leadership. This paper looks into the significant events and decisions that defined Syrian foreign policy during first decade of presidency of Bashar al-Assad. This paper explores the continuity and change in Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Assad, offering a comprehensive examination of how his leadership influenced Syria's interactions with key regional and international actors from 2000 till 2010.

Keywords: Syrian Foreign Policy, Bashar al-Assad, Intifada, 9/11, Hezbollah.

Introduction

Bashar al-Assad inherited a Ba'athist regime built around the personality of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who had long served as the regime's central figure, both domestically and internationally. Bashar assumed control of a nation deeply enmeshed in regional disputes and global geopolitical tensions. The central argument of this paper is that it was Bashar's own leadership style-marked by a blend of caution, pragmatism, and a desire to assert Syria's sovereignty-that critically shaped the country's strategic decisions during this period.

Assad's Policy towards Israel

When Bashar al-Assad became President of Syria in 2000, he inherited a policy of strong opposition to Israel, particularly over the Golan Heights, which remained central to Syria's foreign policy. Though initially open to peace talks, regional tensions and the outbreak of the Second *Intifada* led Assad to adopt a harder stance. Assad's rhetoric became increasingly hostile, notably during speeches in 2001 and 2002 where he criticized Israel and defended attacks on Israeli civilians. His approach resonated with public sentiment in Damascus and other Arab streets, reinforcing his tough policies. ^[1]

Beyond its rhetoric, Assad's Syria took concrete steps to support groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. During the Second *Intifada*, Syria increased its backing for Palestinian factions opposing the peace process, notably Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as part of a strategy to challenge Israeli policies and strengthen Syria's role in the Palestinian cause. This support, encompassing political, financial, and logistical aid, allowed these groups to sustain operations against Israel, helping Syria counterbalance Israeli influence in the region. Assad's support for Palestinian factions bolstered his reputation, both domestically and regionally, as a strong defender of Arab and Palestinian interests. ^[2]

Assad made Syria's increasingly firm stance clear on two critical issues. First, he strengthened the connection between the Syrian and Palestinian negotiations, making any advancement on the Syrian front dependent on an end to the *Intifada*-reflecting the influence of the *Intifada* on Syrian public opinion. Second, Syria insisted on re-evaluating the peace process before resuming talks, aiming to establish a new approach that would be productive and avoid the disappointment that followed a decade of fruitless discussions.

Assad had to make some adjustment to his stance in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Faced with perceived American pressure due to their policy in Iraq, Syria initially softened its stance on the conflict with Israel, indicating a willingness to restart stalled peace negotiations. Although Syria had strongly opposed the U.S. backed 'road map' for peace early in 2003, this resistance soon became a passive acceptance. President Bashar al-Assad expressed a neutral stance on the plan, questioning why Syria and Lebanon were excluded from this peace initiative. Despite reports that Assad's brother Maher al-Assad signalled Syrian interest in renewing talks with Israel, Syria quickly denied this. The US, however, excluded Syria from the roadmap introduced in June 2003, clarifying that Syria's involvement would only be considered after substantial progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and only if Syria met a series of American demands in various areas.

As the United States faced challenges in Iraq and struggled to advance the peace 'road map,' Syria grew more confident and adopted an increasingly tougher stance toward Israel, with tensions between the two nations escalating by late 2003. In August of that year, Israeli fighter jets flew over Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's residence in Latakia as a warning to curb Hezbollah attacks along the Israel-Lebanon border.^[3] Later, Israeli jets struck a militant training camp near Damascus, marking the first Israeli attack on Syrian territory since the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This strike was a response to a suicide bombing in Haifa, attributed to Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which killed 22 Israelis. Israel intended the attack to signal Syria, where Palestinian Islamic Jihad's leadership was based, to end its support for Palestinian militant groups. In response to Israeli transgression, Syria filed a complaint with the United Nations Security Council, though it was met with strong opposition from the US, which refused to condemn Israel and instead held Syria responsible for the worsening regional tensions.^[4]

Bashar al-Assad's Response to 9/11 and the Iraq Crisis

The September 11 attacks on the United States had a significant impact on Syria's foreign policy under Bashar al-Assad. The 9/11 attacks in 2001, which were orchestrated by al-Qaeda, marked the beginning of a new phase in Syria-US relations, pushing the two nations increasingly towards confrontation. Furthermore, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq added additional strain, deeply influencing Syria's diplomatic stance and strategic calculations. Bashar al-Assad faced the challenge of dealing with a more assertive United States while protecting Syria's national interests and regional influence. His approach involved a careful strategy of 'strategic ambiguity,' enabling Syria to navigate the post-9/11 political landscape.

Bashar al-Assad's strategic ambiguity involved a dual approach: offering selective cooperation with the United States, particularly in intelligence-sharing, while simultaneously resisting U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Syria found itself under increased scrutiny due to its longstanding support for groups considered terrorist organizations by the U.S., such as Hezbollah and Palestinian factions. Recognizing the risks of direct confrontation, Assad provided intelligence on al-Qaeda operatives and cooperated with the U.S. on certain counterterrorism measures. This cooperation was pragmatic, aimed at preventing Syria from becoming a target of U.S. military action, as had happened with Afghanistan and later Iraq.

However, this cooperation was limited and carefully calibrated. Assad was wary of being perceived as too close to the U.S., as this could alienate Syria's regional allies, particularly Iran and Hezbollah, and undermine his domestic legitimacy. Bashar al-Assad, as part of his policy of strategic ambiguity, continued to support Syria's regional allies, particularly Iran and Hezbollah, even as he engaged with the U.S. on counterterrorism. Assad understood that these regional alliances were crucial for Syria's strategic depth and its ability to project power in the region. By maintaining these ties, Assad could signal to both the U.S. and his regional allies that Syria remained committed to its anti-imperialist stance, despite the limited cooperation on counterterrorism.^[5]

This strategy also involved a calculated defiance of U.S. demands for Syria to sever its support for Hezbollah and Palestinian groups. Assad's refusal to comply fully with these demands allowed him to maintain his regime's credibility among Syria's traditional allies and supporters. By resisting U.S. pressure, Assad maintained Syria's strategic autonomy and reinforced Syria's image as a defender of Arab nationalism and resistance against Israeli occupation, which was central to his domestic and regional legitimacy.

Another aspect of Bashar's strategic ambiguity was to avoid direct military confrontation with the United States. The invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent build-up to the Invasion of Iraq made it clear that the U.S. was willing to use military force to achieve its objectives. Assad's limited cooperation with the U.S. on counterterrorism was, therefore, a tactical move designed to keep Syria off Washington's target list. By offering just enough cooperation to appease U.S. concerns, Assad managed to avoid the fate of Saddam Hussein, whose regime was finally toppled by the US in 2003. As stated above, the Syrian actions of intelligence sharing and crackdown on Jihadi elements were welcomed by Americans and President Bush himself telephoned Assad to express his gratitude. The goodwill between Syria and US, however, proved short-lived as a section of American government began to club Syria with Iraq and blamed it for supporting terrorism. In response, Syrian officials argued that they were merely supporting the Palestinians' legitimate resistance against Israeli occupation and denied any involvement in terrorism.

Side by side with the American focus on Syrian assistance to the terrorist organizations, high-ranking figures in the United States began attacking Syria for arming itself with advanced non-conventional weapons, especially chemical and biological weapons. US officials, including Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, frequently warned Syria about its continued development of advanced non-conventional weaponry, notably chemical and biological weapons. Reports surfaced in October 2002 suggesting a collaboration between Syria and Russia in the nuclear field; however, both Moscow and Damascus denied these claims, suggesting that they were a U.S. and Israeli ploy to justify a potential future attack on Syria.^[6]

Furthermore, anti-Syrian sentiment was evident in the U.S. Congress, influenced by lobbying from groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and the anti-Syrian Lebanese diaspora. In the summer of 2002, Congress began discussing the 'Syrian Accountability' draft legislation, which proposed expanding sanctions on Syria due to its backing of terrorist organizations and its military presence in Lebanon. This legislation aimed to restrict academic and cultural exchanges with Syrian institutions and limit the entry of Syrian citizens, including students and researchers, into the

U.S. Although the draft law initially stalled in Congress, it was eventually passed in 2003.^[7]

Tensions between Syria and the United States escalated as Washington prepared for a military strike against Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Syria aligned itself with Iraq and actively opposed U.S. efforts to gather broad international support for the operation. However, on November 8, 2002, Syria endorsed U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441, which demanded that Iraq allow the return of international inspectors or face severe repercussions. Syria portrayed its support for the resolution as a diplomatic victory, asserting that it was acting in line with the Arab consensus it represented on the Security Council. Syrian officials claimed their vote helped delay or even prevent an American-led attack on Iraq.^[8]

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq proved the Syrians wrong. The American and allied forces, in spite of Syrian and international opposition, entered Iraq to dethrone the regime of Saddam Hussain. Assad strongly opposed this invasion, adopting a firm stance against U.S. policies in the region. Assad's speeches often denounced the invasion as both illegal and unjust, urging the international community to resist what he characterized as an imperialistic endeavour by the United States. Assad was concerned that the U.S. actions were part of a broader strategy to reshape the Middle East according to American interests, which would marginalize Syria and undermine its influence in the region.

For Bashar al-Assad, the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime posed a significant strategic challenge. To address this, Assad adopted a discreet approach to undermine U.S. efforts in Iraq. Post-invasion, Syria actively backed anti-American groups in Iraq. This support was a calculated move to disrupt U.S. military operations and block the formation of a pro-American government in Baghdad. By facilitating the movement of insurgents and resources into Iraq, Syria aimed to prolong the conflict, overextend U.S. forces, and complicate their objectives. A U.S.-aligned government in Iraq was perceived as a direct threat to Syria's regional interests and influence in the Arab world. Supporting insurgents was thus a strategic effort to safeguard Syria's position and prevent the emergence of a not so friendly government in Iraq.^[9]

Syria's support for insurgents had significant diplomatic repercussions, straining its relations with the United States and leading to increased international isolation. The covert support for insurgents exacerbated tensions between Syria and the U.S., leading to increased diplomatic and economic pressures. The U.S. accused Syria of undermining its efforts in Iraq and contributing to the insurgency, resulting in further sanctions and international condemnation. The U.S. and its allies viewed Syria's support for insurgents as a destabilizing factor in the region, which led to increased scrutiny and condemnation from the international community.

Bashar al-Assad's Policy towards Lebanon

Bashar al-Assad faced significant challenges regarding Syria's military presence in Lebanon. Syria continued to have military presence in Lebanon since the time of Lebanese civil war. Though Assad had done a downsizing in 2002, Syria still maintain its military presence in the Lebanon as of early 2003. However, the turmoil that erupted in Iraq in the spring of 2003 ultimately extended to Lebanon, resulting in unprecedented calls for the expulsion of Syrian forces. This shift was a clear indication of the negative consequences for Damascus stemming from its deteriorating relations with the United States. The United States, in collaboration with

France, spearheaded efforts that threatened Syria's ongoing presence in Lebanon. This led to the passing of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 which called for respecting Lebanon's sovereignty and constitution, the withdrawal of all foreign troops-primarily Syrian forces-from Lebanon, and the disbanding of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias.^[10]

The assassination of Rafik Hariri, a former Prime Minister, in 2005, marked a significant turning point in Bashar al-Assad's policy towards Lebanon. Hariri, a leading figure in Lebanese politics and a vocal critic of Syrian influence in Lebanon, was killed in a car bomb explosion in Beirut. Hariri had been a key opponent of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon and had led efforts to challenge Syrian control over Lebanese politics. Hariri's assassination occurred against a backdrop of rising anti-Syrian sentiment in Lebanon and increasing pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon.^[11]

The assassination of Rafik Hariri triggered an unprecedented wave of reactions both within Lebanon and internationally. The Lebanese opposition intensified its criticism of Syria and its allies (mainly Hezbollah) in Beirut. Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt emerged as a key opposition figure, openly accusing Syria and its 'collaborationist regime' in Lebanon of being responsible for the assassination. Jumblatt and his allies garnered significant backing from various segments of the Lebanese population, including Maronites, Sunnis, and Druze, who were frustrated with Syria's continued presence and saw Hariri's murder as an opportunity to push for Syrian ouster.^[12]

In the aftermath of Hariri's assassination, the Syrian government, denied any involvement in the murder. Syria faced intense international pressure and accusations of being behind the assassination, leading to a diplomatic isolation. The international community, particularly Western nations, imposed sanctions and criticized Syria's role in Lebanon.^[13] The international community, led by the United States and France, condemned the assassination and called for a thorough investigation. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1595, demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the disarmament of militant groups. The Resolution 1595 also established the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission to investigate the assassination of Hariri.^[14]

In response to constant regional and international pressure, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad convened a special session of the Syrian People's Assembly on March 5, 2005, where he announced the planned withdrawal. The Syrian military exit was completed by April 2005. The withdrawal ended Syria's military presence in Lebanon after nearly three decades. Although Syria and its allies attempted to frame the exit as dignified, the process was widely perceived as a humiliation, driven by both international and Lebanese consensus.^[15]

The sense of humiliation, however, did not last long as the new developments that were about take place in the region provided Syria an opportunity to regain the lost prestige. The opportunity came in the form of the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War. The 2006 War had significant repercussions for Syrian-Israeli relations and Bashar al-Assad's foreign policy. Although Syria was not directly involved in the conflict, it supported Hezbollah actively. The Syrian support for Hezbollah during the 2006 War was part of a broader strategy to challenge Israeli power and influence regional politics.

The outcome of the 2006 war, with Hezbollah being perceived as having successfully resisted Israeli forces, was leveraged by Assad to enhance his position domestically and

regionally. The conflict was portrayed as a victory for Hezbollah and, by extension, for Syria's strategic alliances. The perception of Hezbollah's resistance against Israel helped Assad consolidate support within Syria. The war allowed Assad to project strength and resilience, reinforcing his image as a defender of Arab and Islamic causes. This alignment with Hezbollah was seen as a demonstration of Syria's continued commitment to resisting Israeli occupation and aggression. This bolstered Assad's legitimacy in the Arab world and reinforced his stance against Israeli policies.^[16]

The Syrian role in 2006 Lebanon War had significant implications for Syria's international standing. The conflict drew increased scrutiny from the U.S. and its allies, who viewed Syria's support for Hezbollah as a destabilizing factor in the region. The U.S. and several European countries criticized Syria for its role in supporting Hezbollah, which was seen as a contributor to the escalation of violence. This led to increased diplomatic and economic pressure on Syria, with calls for it to halt its support for militant groups and to address concerns about its role in regional instability.

The formation of a new government in Lebanon in 2008, in which Hezbollah was key actor, led to a reset in Syria-Lebanon relations. The new government of national unity was formed after the signing of Doha Agreement in July 2008. Internationally too, French president Nicholas Sarkozy took a lead in breaking the Western thaw with Assad. The French mediation proved successful when in 2008 Assad announced the establishing of diplomatic relations with Lebanon. This announcement was historic as two countries have not had normal diplomatic ties since they gained their independence from France over 60 years ago, with Syria seeing Lebanon as part of its historic territory. By formally recognizing the sovereignty of Lebanon, Assad heralded a new era in bilateral relations.

Assad's Policy towards Iran

The ascension of Bashar al-Assad to the presidency in 2000 marked a new phase in Syrian-Iranian relations. Assad sought to strengthen ties with Iran as a means to bolster Syria's position in a region increasingly influenced by U.S. policy following the September 11 attacks in 2001. The two countries found common ground in their opposition to U.S. interventions in the Middle East, particularly during the Iraq War that began in 2003.

In response to regional upheavals, such as the 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, Syria relied on Iran for support against perceived threats from Western powers and regional adversaries like Saudi Arabia. The Cedar Revolution led to increased tensions between Syria and Lebanon's pro-Western factions, further solidifying Syria's dependence on Iranian backing.

Military cooperation between Syria and Iran intensified during this period. In June 2006, defence ministers from both countries signed an agreement emphasizing their commitment to mutual security against threats posed by Israel and the United States. Iranian military support included arms sales and training for Syrian forces, reinforcing Assad's regime amid rising internal dissent and external pressures. The Lebanon War in 2006 further illustrated this military collaboration. Iran's support for Hezbollah during the conflict showcased the strategic importance of Syria as a conduit for Iranian influence in Lebanon and its role in countering Israeli actions. This conflict not only solidified military ties but also deepened ideological bonds between Tehran and Damascus.

[17]

Assad's Policy towards Saudi Arabia

Bashar al-Assad, after assuming office in July 2000, made his first foreign state visit was to Saudi Arabia in October 2000. This visit symbolized an initial phase of cooperation between the two nations, as both sought to stabilize their regional influence amidst rising Saudi-Iran tensions. The US invasion of Iraq led to huge differences between Syria and Saudi Arabia. While the Saudis supported the invasion, President Assad strongly criticized the US actions in region. The Syria-Saudi Arabia relations, however, remained by and large stable in initial years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency.

The bilateral relations however began to deteriorate following the assassination of Rafik Hariri, a prominent Lebanese politician and a key ally of Saudi Arabia in 2005. Hariri's assassination was widely attributed to Syrian involvement, leading to heightened tensions between the two countries. Both Syria and Saudis had supported opposing factions in Lebanon. While the Saudis and Syrians lined up behind Hariri camp, the Syrians supported the Hezbollah opposition, with its close links to Iran. Their competition turned very ugly in 2006, when Assad taunted the (US-backed) Saudis and Egyptians that they were 'half men' and powerless in the face of Israel's onslaught on Lebanon.^[18] By 2008, relations were significantly strained and Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador from Syria. King Abdullah's boycott of the 2008 Arab League summit in Damascus was a clear indication of Saudi discontent with Syria's foreign policy and its support for militant groups like Hezbollah.^[19]

The Syria-Saudi Arabia ties remained subdued for a while before they were repaired in 2009-10. In August 2009, Saudi Arabia appointed a new ambassador to Syria, and Saudi King made a high-level visits to Syria in October 2009 aimed at repairing diplomatic ties. Bashar al-Assad too visited Riyadh multiple times between 2009-10, signalling a potential thaw in relations.^[20]

Conclusion

To sum up, we can say that Bashar al-Assad's foreign policy and crisis management strategies from 2000 to 2010 were fundamentally shaped by the need to construct and maintain Syria's identity as a sovereign, resistant power. Assad skilfully handled the above discussed crises and successfully withstand the American pressure in first decade of his presidency. Assad's leadership was crucial in navigating crises, such as Iraq and Lebanon, and reinforcing Syria's position through strategic alliances and a defined regional role.

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