Post-independence Syria and the Great Powers (1946-1958): How Western Power Politics Pushed the Country Toward the Soviet Union

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Abstract:

This paper reconstructs the political history of the Syrian Arab Republic from the time of the country's emergence as an independent state in 1946 to the time of merger with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic in 1958. From the beginning, Syria faced geopolitical challenges, which undermined the country's political stability. Apart from intra-Arab conflicts and the issue of Zionist colonization in Palestine, Syria quickly developed into a main site of Cold War conflict between the western powers and the Soviet Union. This was due to UK and US refusal to support Syria's statehood on the economic and military plane. The western rejection of substantial assistance to Syria, largely motivated by efforts to back up Israel and fully unrelated to the question of whether or not Syria was governed by democratic or authoritarian rulers, explains the country's shift toward the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s. The paper examines western efforts to unseat Syrian governments through covert action (especially in 1949 and 1956-1957) and shows how the country's leadership opted for merger with Nasser's Egypt and military assistance from the Soviet Union in order to avoid further destabilization. Earlier scholarship is advanced on two planes: firstly, declassified British government sources are utilized; secondly, statistics from the SIPRI database on arms exports to the Middle East back up the analysis of western strategic interests in the Middle East during the early Cold War period. The paper concludes that western failure to welcome Syria as an independent actor in the Middle East, which was due to the existence of previous strategic alignment with competing states in the region, opened the door for the Soviet Union to emerge as the long-term patron of the Syrian state.

Keywords:

1. From the French Mandate to Syrian independence

In 1916, the Entente powers Britain and France secretly signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, named after a British politician and a French diplomat, which provided for the division of the Levant region (also referred to as the *Bilad al-Sham* or historical administrative unit of Syria under the Ottomans) between the two powers in the event of a defeat of the Ottoman Empire. After the victorious conclusion of World War 1, the Entente powers dismantled the Ottoman Empire and the Levant became divided into a southern British and a northern French zone of influence. This division of the *Bilad al-Sham* produced four new territorial entities of Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The former two entities of Palestine and Jordan – now separated by a British imposed borderline along the Jordan River – were handed over to Britain as League of Nations Mandates. In turn, France received two League of Nations Mandates for Lebanon and Syria. In this context, the patronage of the League of Nations served mostly to cover up the fact that the four new Mandate entities were in reality controlled by British and French colonial administrators acting under the notion that the local population was not mature enough politically to allow for independent statehood.

The French subsequently organized their rule in the northern Levant by parceling off 'Greater Lebanon' from the historical *Bilad al-Sham*. The 'Greater Lebanon' entity, put in place in 1922, came to contain the Maronite Christian areas – traditionally closely linked to France – but also incorporated Shia-settled territory to the south and Sunni- and Druze-settled regions to the east of Mount Lebanon. This redrafting created a numerical balance between different sects (Seale 2010: 117, 165-168). It also meant that what remained of Syria after the division was territorially much diminished in comparison to the *Bilad al-Sham.* Next, the French further subdivided Syria into smaller districts (or cantons) that were created in order to allow for privileged relationships with local ethnic and religious minorities. It was expected that the minorities would turn into loyal French proxies to impose an effective system of divide-and-rule to control the Sunni Muslim majority. In terms of military control, the French established the *Troupes Spécials* that were recruited from the minority populations of the Druze, Christians, Circassians, and Alawites while the majority population of Sunni Muslims was excluded from joining the French-controlled armed forces.[1]

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[1] After independence in 1946, the overrepresentation of minorities in the Syrian army remained in place as an artefact of the French divide-and-rule strategy.

This French concern with a balance of power between local forces – in the sense of making them control each other – explains the further subdivision of the Syrian Mandate into Alawite, Druze, Northern (Aleppo-centered), and Southern (Damascus-centered) 'states' (Fildis 2011: 134-135). Efforts to permanently establish these entities failed, however. Instead, the French soon experienced a series of rebellions against their rule, the most prominent being the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925-1927, which originated in the Druze region and subsequently expanded to other parts of Syria before the French were able to repress it. Another conflict emerged due to the French decision to hand over the Sanjak of Alexandretta (the northern coastal area of the Syrian Mandate) to Turkey in 1938. Although this decision was illegal under League of Nations statutes, forbidding Mandate powers to cede territory to other states, it was taken to help the French improve relations with Kemalist Turkey prior to World War 2. The cessation of Alexandretta subsequently forced a large share of the local Armenian and Arab population to flee to other regions of the Syrian Mandate.

In the context of the contested Mandate, the last opportunity to peacefully resolve the conflict between the French authorities and the Syrian nationalist leaders could have been the 'Franco-Syrian Treaty' that was negotiated and signed in Paris on 9 September 1936 under the French Popular Front government. The Treaty held that Syria would be granted full independence after a three-year probation period. It also provided for a twenty-five-year agreement of friendship and alliance between France and Syria that included a French military mission, paid for by Syrian sources, to train the Syrian army after independence (Seale 2010: 342-350). However, Leon Blum's Popular Front government lost office in June of 1937 and subsequent French governments refused to ratify the Treaty. As a result of this failure to reach a mutually agreed settlement to end the Mandate in a peaceful manner, relationships between France and Syrian nationalist leaders broke down, never to recover. In this context, it should be noted that US observers were already critical of French predominance in the Levant. Commenting on the Franco-Syrian Treaty, the US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, stated on 14 October 1936 the view of the US government: 'We have no desire to *urge* the local governments to *sign* or *conclude* an agreement of any type with the French. We would even refuse to approve a treaty giving *discriminatory privileges* to France or French nationals' (Hull, quoted in Sachar 1973: 314, emphasis in the original).

When World War 2 started, the French position in the Levant weakened further. Crucially, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt put forward a concept for a future bilateral regional division of interests between Britain and the US in the Middle East, which excluded

France as a regional stakeholder. He subsequently strengthened the US bargaining position in founding the close alliance between the US administration and the Saudi King Ibn Saud, which was concluded at the end of WW2 and granted US oil companies exclusive access to the largest oil reserves in the Middle East. For US diplomats of the period, the agreement constituted 'a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history' (Merriam, quoted in Gendzier 2011, footnote 3). The US President summed up his own thinking on the Greater Middle East in a statement to the British ambassador in Washington, Lord Halifax, as follows: 'Persian oil is yours. We share the oil of Iraq and Kuwait. As for Saudi Arabian oil, it is ours' (Roosevelt, quoted in Yergin, 1991: 40). In a similar vein, France played a limited role in the planning process for the United Nations (UN) system that was supposed to provide the framework of the post-WW2 political order. In this context, Roosevelt put forward his idea of the 'Four Policemen' suggesting that the US, Britain, the Soviet Union, and [nationalist] China should jointly provide geopolitical pillars of a future multilateral world order. Thus, his willingness to ignore French and especially Gaullist geopolitical claims was clearly visible to observers (Hoopes and Brinkley 1997: 100-101).

For his part, Charles de Gaulle, the leader of the Free French forces, was convinced that Britain secretly planned to take over the French stakes in the Levant region. He did not trust the assurances issued by the British Minister for the Middle East, Oliver Lyttelton, who stated in 1945 that 'France should have the predominant position in Syria and the Lebanon over any other European Power' (Lyttelton, quoted in Hourani 1946: 245). In reality, British projects to exclude France from the region were in place; they aimed to link a British-guided partition of Palestine – in order to allow for the creation of the planned Jewish state – with schemes to create a Greater Syria based on the unification of Hashemite Jordan, French-administered Syria, the Arab remainder of Palestine, and Lebanon. Such British plans were frequently revised during the course of WW2. Over time, reliance on the British Hashemite clients in Jordan and Iraq was downgraded. Instead, potential new alliances with Arab nationalist leaders in Lebanon and Syria as well as Egyptian and Saudi leaders were also explored (Thomas 2000: 76-78, 83, 88). This British regional strategy was resented by de Gaulle who was keen to block any British gains at French expense and/or the emergence of an Anglo-American coalition against France in the region. In fact, de Gaulle continued to aspire to influence the economic, military, and cultural fields in Lebanon and Syria. His plans would

have included military bases and the continuing French control of the *Troupes Spécials* – goals that were by then unacceptable to Arab and Syrian nationalist opinion.

Thus, French attempts to restore control of Syria by military means after the conclusion of WW2 in Europe, such as the French bombardment of Damascus and other Syrian cities on 29 and 30 May 1945, only served to demonstrate France's isolation in the face of local Syrian, regional Arab, and global public opinion. Since the French military campaign in Syria coincided with the San Francisco Conference, which took place from April to June of 1945 to set up the UN system, the Anglo-American leaders had to condemn French military unilateralism in strong terms. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, demanded immediate French withdrawal 'in order to avoid collision between British and French forces' (Hoopes and Brinkley 1997: 201), and British troops subsequently intervened in Syria on 1 June 1945 with the approval of US President Truman. This move once again highlighted French isolation and was soon followed by the British takeover of the local police force and British supply of light arms to the nascent Syrian and Lebanese armies. These actions, previously agreed with the US State Department (Foreign Relations of the United States 6 November 1945: 1045), were intended to prepare Syrian and Lebanese armed forces to take over after independence. At the same time, the French *Troupes Spécials* suffered large-scale desertions to the Syrian national government – an event recorded in Syrian nationalist historiography as the foundation of the independent Syrian army in 1945, which preceded the country's political independence in 1946. In a last ditch effort, de Gaulle started to advocate for an international conference on the future of the Levant. He hoped to strengthen the French position by appealing to potential new regional stakeholders in the Middle East such as the Soviet Union and nationalist China in order to balance against the Anglo-American alliance (Melki 1997: 101). Not surprisingly, his idea to invite the Soviet Union to participate in deliberations was immediately rejected by the Anglo-American coalition. Moreover, Soviet geopolitical objectives at this point in time – directly after the conclusion of WW2 and before the outbreak of early Cold War clashes – were mostly focused on the Turkish Straights, Azerbaijan, and northern Iran rather than the Levant (Thomas 2000: 84). Thus, de Gaulle ultimately failed in his efforts to maintain the French position in the Levant.

Following the evacuation of the last French troops from Syria on 15 April 1946, the country became independent on 17 April. Overall, the balance sheet of the Mandate period was negative: the French had failed to penetrate Syrian society as the 'Mandate from first to last was unwanted and resented by the native population themselves' providing France 'with

the barest minimum of prestige and even less material advantage' (Sachar 1973: 332). The French failure to maintain a bargaining position in Syria, let alone to establish a close relationship with the Syrian elites, was underlined after independence. The first President of independent Syria, Shukri Quwatli, quickly removed all traces of French influence in the Syrian education system and advanced a policy of linguistic Arabization. Moreover, the country withdrew from the franc currency bloc, thereby delinking the Syrian currency from French regional economic objectives (Sachar 1973: 331). Western diplomatic dispatches of the period frequently used the term 'xenophobic' to describe Quwatli's government: the new regime acted in a nativist and inward-looking manner, and efforts to establish a treaty-based system of political relations between France and Syria were by now rejected by Syria's leadership.

In domestic politics, Quwatli's government amounted to a conservative regime with a narrow social base derived from traditional notables and the landowning oligarchy. Because of this, the country's regional alliances soon began to overlap with the personal and business relationships of Quwatli and focused in particular on the Saudi and Egyptian Kings. Crucially, the Syrian government took the initiative to invite the United States to send a military mission to train the armed forces of the newly independent country. This decision made Syria the first country in the Arab-speaking world to do so. However, the US rejected Syria's request after careful deliberation since US alignment with Zionist objectives already dominated US regional strategy at this time (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1209-1213).[2]

At the time of independence, Syria no longer had any natural geopolitical patron and therefore became 'the only country in the Arab-speaking world without some sort of Great Power prop' (Melki 1997: 103-104). With the advantage of hindsight, it is clear that the failure to prepare an 'imperial succession' for Syria – due to the urgent Anglo-American interest to remove France as a serious regional contender – had already set the stage for the country's subsequent trajectory away from the western geopolitical zone of influence. Moreover, the subsequent French decision to become the first military patron of Israel further confirmed to Syrian state- and military elites that the country had to rely on its own resources. Thus, Syria's policymaking during the Quwatli period became defined by a pragmatic

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[2] One key statement, pointing to the US balancing act between different potential allies in the Middle East region, suggested that 'if the United States should throw its full support to the Zionist program in Palestine, the resulting atmosphere in Syria would without doubt make the success of the mission an impossibility' (ibid.: 1213, footnote omitted). Subsequent Syrian government requests for military missions from neutral Switzerland and Sweden were equally rejected.

neutralist position based on a proclaimed disinterest in the emerging agenda of the Cold War. While there were already some contacts with the Soviets and their proxies – such as a 1947 Czech arms deal that resulted in some small arms deliveries to the Syrian army – these contacts were not yet politically significant. In fact, Syria's leadership did not adopt explicitly anti-western policies until the mid-1950s.

In conclusion, Anglo-American policymaking during the immediate post-independence period failed to integrate Syria into a new regional security structure. The underlying reason for the absence of a coherent Syria policy was that the US already focused on alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel while the UK was already committed to Syria's Hashemite Arab neighbors Jordan and Iraq. By way of geopolitical accident, the French Mandate territory of Syria remained therefore outside of the regional structure of Anglo-American client states. The next section further analyzes Syria's role in the context of the regional Arab and global geopolitical framework.

2. The regional Arab state system after WW2

The development of the Arab state system followed a different trajectory in comparison to the earlier emergence of powerful European states and the United States. While the European states and the US emerged over longer periods of time based on wars of conquest and the forced unification of smaller into larger state entities, this process was blocked in the Arab world due to Ottoman rule and the rising influence of European colonialism (Lustick 1997) . Due to this dual system of domination, modern Arab nationalism emerged in a delayed fashion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It only took off as a political mass movement in reaction to the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after WW1 and the western powers subsequent imposition of their direct authority over the Arab world. In their effort to unite the Arabs, the nationalist leaders stressed that outsiders had controlled the Arab world through a strategy of 'divide-and-rule'. In doing so, they were themselves in danger of overstating the case for 'one indivisible Arab nation' (the famous slogan advanced by the Baath Party founders Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar). In proclaiming the unity of the Arabs, the question of who belonged culturally and politically to this 'nation' and where the territorial boundaries of Arabism should be drawn was bound to emerge.[3] From the beginning, Arab

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[3] For example, the party symbol of the Syrian Baath Party displays a map of the 'Arab nation' in green color. This 'nation' reaches from Mauretania on the West African coast via all coastal Maghreb states toward the Arab

nationalists faced the problem of how to develop an inclusive and comprehensive understanding of their own movement in its relationship with other sources of collective regional identity such as religion, sect, tribe, or linguistic and ethnic characteristics. Without further discussing these issues here, one needs to stress that outside interferences in the Arab world – such as the colonial imposition of boundaries by Britain and France in the Levant and on the Arab peninsula – remain a crucial explanatory factor for the comparative weakness of the Arabs as political actors in modern times. However, one should not overstate this element of outside interference, significant as it is, at the cost of neglecting the Arab elites own agency in maintaining internal divisions.

Turning now to Syria's situation after independence in 1946, the country emerged as part of a new post-WW2 regional Arab state system in the Levant and on the Arab peninsula. This system was characterized by the absence of a regional hegemon and consisted in the main of five states, namely the two branches of the British-backed Hashemite monarchies in Jordan and Iraq, the newly independent Lebanon and Syria, and Saudi Arabia. In addition, Egypt belonged to this system as an important 'out-of-area' neighboring state that differed from the five other states due to its long pre-modern history of independent statehood. Saudi Arabia was also a special case since it had been created in the 1920s by a war of conquest against the Jordan-based branch of the Hashemites uniting large shares of the Arab peninsula under the leadership of the Saud family. By contrast, the borders of the other four states had been artificially drafted under the British and French Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and its subsequent adaptations. These four entities were 'territorial' or 'state nations' with rather shallow roots and differed fundamentally from the late 19th century European model of ethnic nationalism (Breuilly 1993).[4]

It soon became apparent that the new Arab 'state nations' jointly faced a number of challenges. First, they were initially unable to act like modern states since they all lacked an effective domestic administrative and economic system. Second, they commanded only weak loyalty from citizens since state nationalism and the concept of citizenship had to compete with older and more established forms of belonging and collective identity at the level below

peninsula and includes pre-division Sudan. This clearly raises questions about how Arab nationalism relates to other, potentially challenging nationalisms and group identities.

[4] In fact, most postcolonial 'state nations' in Africa and Asia display characteristics of a 'delayed' or weak nationalism, and ethnic and sectarian divisions undermine state cohesion in Syria and the neighboring polities of Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.

and above the Arab state entities such as kinship, sect, religion, and tribe. Third, modern Arab nationalists frequently emphasized primary allegiance to pan-Arabism rather than loyalty to individual Arab states; indeed it has been stressed that '[t]he claim that the Arab state is a territorial state and not a nation state is based on the assumption that it is part of a wider Arab nation' (Kienle 1990: 17).

Yet despite these and other challenges, the regional *system* of Arab states proved to be remarkably stable in the second half of the 20th century. Fairly recently, it was still being suggested that '[f]or all its upheavals, the Middle East is a region of stable state entities' (Halliday 2005: 75). In fact, this conundrum of weak Arab 'state nations' existing in a (relatively) stable regional state system requires further analysis. First of all, these contradictory features must be scrutinized in a critical manner in order to avoid oversimplification. On the one hand, Arab 'state nations' have acquired more features of modern statehood over time although one might still question whether or not this has added to state stability. More importantly, however, the regional Arab state system has not been stable in any endogenous manner and would in all likelihood have suffered collapse without the regular intervention of western powers and the Soviet Union policing the system from outside. Finally, many Arab states continued to suffer from a narrow economic base and relied mostly on income from oil and other mineral wealth rather than domestic industrialization efforts. Thus, the Arab oil states became closely linked with the core OECD economies since a major share of their oil rent was reinvested in the economies of advanced countries or spent unproductively on arms and domestic national security states (Hinnebusch 2012).

Thus, the Arab state system quickly developed into one of the main sites of geopolitical competition between the two superpowers in the Cold War period (Hiro 1982: ch. 12-13). When Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt started to challenge the status quo in the Arab world from the mid-1950s onwards, the western powers immediately engaged in counter interventions to stop him. It was only the British military operation in Jordan against indigenous Jordanian supporters of Nasser in 1957 and the military intervention of the US in Lebanon against local Nasserists in 1958 that defended the rule of the Jordanian King and the then pro-American Lebanese President, respectively (Hiro 1982: 319-320; Blackwell 2009: 187). In summary, the survival of the deeply fragmented and weak states of Jordan and Lebanon was to a large extent due to the interference of the Western powers in their domestic affairs. This must be understood as part of a broader western interest in maintaining the imposed colonial borders and territorial states in the region (Maninger 2013: 302, 306).

Moreover, regional factors are equally significant to explain the survival of the Arab state system, and alliances and conflicts between such states must be interpreted in terms of the search for 'anti-hegemonic equilibria within this system' (Kienle 1990: 27). However, such efforts to counterbalance against challenges to the regional status quo tended to bring in external actors, which in turn made it more difficult to reestablish the regional balance.[5] In the end, nearly all of the intra-Arab challenges to the regional status quo failed, since hidden warfare and the clandestine funding of local proxies could not make up for the lack of a strong local support base (Rathmell 1995: ch. 6). No Arab country succeeded in efforts to permanently take over another one. Thus, Nasser's project of union between Egypt and Syria, as implemented during the United Arab Republic between 1958 and 1961, was only possible due to fear on the part of Syrian actors in the Baath Party and elsewhere to fall victim to domestic challenges from a US-backed right-wing coup in Syria in line with similar US and UK interventions in neighboring Jordan (Brown 2013: 21-23; Little 1990). Yet the United Arab Republic also broke up when it became apparent to Syrian policymakers that the country's political life had simply been taken over by Egyptian administrators, thereby disenfranchising all Syrian actors independent from their political affiliation. In the end, Nasser's short-term success in challenging the status quo could not be sustained.

In conclusion, the Nasserist and Baathist variations of Arab nationalism ultimately failed to act as effective unifying forces in the Arab world. While this defeat was to some extent due to outside interventions into Arab affairs, the main reason was that the regional Arab state system, imposed by the western colonial powers, divided even the most committed Arab nationalists into factions that competed with each other. Thus, Arab nationalism became intimately linked with existing territorial Arab states and depended for political survival on the effective control of material and ideological resources that only states could provide (Chaitani 2007: 164; Kienle 1990: 50). This is not to deny Arab nationalism a significant historical role; rather one needs to account for the fact that the abstract commitment to 'unity of the Arab nation' proceeded in practice alongside the reinforcement of the existing Arab state system (Owen 1992: 85, 89). In the next section, Syria's political development from independence in 1946 to the rise of Nasserist and Soviet influence in 1956 is discussed,

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[5] Some important events cannot be explained by intra-Arab competition or western intervention but were due to domestic factors. In particular, the Iraqi revolution of 1958 was domestically-driven, produced the full-scale destruction of the British-backed Hashemite regime, and challenged the structural power of western states. The Iraqi events were certainly more dramatic in comparison to the step-by-step decline of the western powers' influence in Syria between 1946 and 1956.

focusing in turn on the influence of global, regional Arab, and local Syrian forces on the course of events.

3. Syria from independence to the rise of Nasserism and Soviet influence (1946-1956)

When Syria became independent in 1946, the country's new leadership could not imagine how geopolitical factors associated with the Cold War, the challenge of Zionism, and intra-Arab conflicts would all contribute to the country's political instability and weak statehood. In fact, there was hardly any time to learn new lessons in the short period between 1946 and 1949, when the military coup of Colonel Husni Zaim, the chief of staff of the Syrian army, ended constitutional government in Syria. From the very start, independent Syria was forced to confront major challenges. In 1947 and 1948, the failure of the combined Arab armies to prevent the expulsion of Arabs from Palestine resulted in the establishment of Israel in 1948. This traumatic experience of defeat, shared by all Arabs, and the subsequent failure to effectively coordinate the Arab states' regional response to Zionism triggered new demands for Arab unity in general and the immediate merger of Arab states in particular. For many Syrians, it was therefore unclear whether Syrian statehood would be anything more than a transitional stage toward some larger Arab (or at least larger Syrian) polity. At this point in time, reference to the Bilad al-Sham of Ottoman times was still a natural way of considering regional politics and the loss of Syrian territory during the French Mandate (the French decision to hand over the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1938) was still a recent event. Moreover, the separation of Syria from the Lebanese ports and trade routes, due to Lebanese independence in 1943, appeared to many Syrian actors as another artificial imposition deriving from the illegitimate French Mandate (Seale 2010: 612-614). In sum, the unclear geographical identity of Syria amounted to a significant foundational burden and questioned the country's economic and political viability.

Additional domestic challenges derived from the underdeveloped political system and the shallow roots of Syria's statehood in society. In particular, the new Syrian government under the Presidency of Shukri Quwatli was little more than a club of the traditional economic elites representing the large landowners and Sunni trading bourgeoisie of Damascus and, to a lesser extent, Aleppo. In this context, the two-party system at the time of independence consisted of the Damascus-based National Party (Quwatli's party) and the Aleppo-based People's Party (in English-language sources also referred to as Popular or Populist Party). In fact, both of these parties were neither connected with popular sectors nor based on political

programs beyond loyalty to traditional leaders and influential families. As a result of Syria's weak national identity, underdeveloped political system, and shallow statehood, neighboring Arab states were keen to suggest 'Arab unity' schemes that would have resulted in the takeover of Syria by another Arab state. The two most likely scenarios at that time were the so-called 'Greater Syria' scheme (unification of Syria with Jordan under the King representing one branch of the Hashemite family) or, alternatively, the so-called 'Fertile Crescent' scheme (unification of Syria with Iraq which was at the time notionally governed by a regent acting for another branch of the Hashemite family but was essentially controlled by British advisors). In order to avoid these two possible schemes of unity at the cost of Syrian statehood, Quwatli relied on his good personal relationship with the Saudi King who had conquered his Kingdom from the Hashemites in the 1920s and was therefore willing to back up Syrian independence in order to avoid a strengthening of Hashemite regional influence.

Yet the survival of the Syrian state was at this early stage still open to questioning. Rather than being powerful in its own right, Syria essentially commanded regional influence as a 'swing state' in being able to back up the regional hegemony of one of the more powerful Arab countries, such as Egypt, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia, by means of forming an inter-state alliance (Yaqub 2004: 36). In short, Syria was too strong to be ignored in competition for regional hegemony and too weak to be a credible contender for regional leadership in its own right.

In order to look more systematically at Syria's position after independence, the current section adopts a three-level analysis focusing in turn on domestic, regional, and global factors. In fact, the interrelationship between the three levels is crucial to explain the Syrian case in a convincing manner. To begin with, one must consider Syria's 'long year' 1949 in which three military coups highlighted the country's weak statehood and vulnerability to internal and external power contests. Patrick Seale's classic account of early Syrian statehood, the monograph *The Struggle for Syria* (1965), not bypassed by latter-day scholarship, can by now be backed up by the 'official-unofficial record' (Dan Atkinson) of secret diplomatic dispatches of the Western powers, especially the British records on Syria that have been published in the mid-2000s (Records of Syria 2005).[6]

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[6] The current paper takes account of the opening of the British sources. As for US sources, CIA files are usually declassified after a delay of 50 years or more. This process appears to offer some assurance about the ultimate transparency of US covert actions. However, declassified CIA material is subjected to extensive censoring, which questions its value for academic research.

To recapitulate the generally known facts, Syrian society experienced in the late 1940s and early 1950s the rise of new popular parties such as the Arab Socialist Baath Party, Syrian Communist Party, and Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). This emergence of new 'ideological' parties took place in parallel with the rise in significance of the domestic political role of the Syrian army and especially the army's officer corps as a new alternative power center. Both of these developments opened new channels for the social advancement of lower socioeconomic groups at the expense of the traditional Syrian elites. In this context, it is significant to note that the Syrian army, as the new core institution to back up domestic political power, diverged from the other Arab armies of the late 1940s and early 1950s. This was due to the absence of a 'natural' geopolitical patron that could have linked the armed forces with external sponsorship and patronage. On the one hand, the three potentially relevant western powers, the US, the UK, and France were aware that effective coordination of their respective policies on Syria would have added to their bargaining power in dealings with Syrian actors such as the army. On the other hand, the three powers were equally anxious not to grant each other undue favors in terms of intervening in Syrian affairs. What united them was little more than a diffuse dislike of what a British diplomat of the time termed the Quwatli administration's 'cult of independence and isolation' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 10: 173). Thus, the three western powers proved unable to act in a unified manner as will be discussed below.

A case in point was the slow and hesitant manner in which Syria's President and the Syrian Parliament dealt with US demands to grant right of way for the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline) that was constructed between 1947 and 1949 on behalf of the US-owned Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco). At this time, Tapline was the most significant US-backed pipeline project in the Arab region. The project served to deliver oil from Qaisuimah in Saudi Arabia to the port city of Sidon in Lebanon. It was significant in the context of US oil interests in Saudi Arabia and of strategic value for supplying oil to US allies in postwar Western Europe. Due to the founding of Israel in 1948, the original plan to have the pipeline end in the Palestinian port of Haifa was abandoned. Instead, a new revised Tapline route was scheduled to first cross Jordan and then the Syrian Golan Heights to end in the port city of Sidon in Lebanon.

In the scholarly literature, there is agreement that '[t]he structure of the U.S. petroleum industry played a key role in determining the content and conduct of foreign oil policy' and that '[c]orporate power molded both policy objectives and outcomes' (Painter, quoted in

Vitalis 2002, footnote 14). There is, however, no agreement about the exact line of causality in terms of whether 'business privilege' (Anderson, quoted in Vitalis 2002, footnote 14) dominated the conduct of US foreign policy or, alternatively, US policymaking converted oil companies into informal instruments of US diplomacy. What is certainly true is that covert action by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), then newly founded, quickly became the instrument of choice to advance US political and economic interests in the region. In the Syrian case, US support for the first coup of Husni Zaim in 1949 is beyond reasonable doubt, although the actual extent of CIA involvement has never been fully established since the relevant CIA files remain closed. The most convincing version of events, based on available open sources, suggests that local CIA agents and the local US military attaché acted independently from official endorsement by the State Department to maintain plausible deniability in their efforts to encourage Zaim to dispose of President Quwatli (Copeland 1970: 50-53; Rathmell 1995: ch. 2; Curtis 2011; Moubayed 2012: 77-81). This effort was to a large extent driven by considerations related to the Tapline project. However, any balanced account of the history of the three Syrian military coups in 1949 must take account of the fact that the intervention of the Syrian military in domestic politics was motivated by mutually overlapping local, regional, and global factors. With the possible exception of Zaim's US-backed first coup, the local Syrian and regional Arab factors proved to be more important than foreign intervention.

At the domestic level, the reputation of the Syrian army had been damaged by its weak performance during the war in Palestine in 1948. Restoring the army's credibility clashed, however, with Quwatli's post-war suggestion to shift Syria toward a militia system. This move would have questioned the power of the officer corps and was therefore rejected in military circles. In addition, Quwatli had failed to provide the army with more advanced weaponry, and the military expected that regime change toward military rule would allow a process of catching- up with the strength of some of the other armies in the region.

At the regional level, Syria's difficult relationship with the two branches of the Hashemite dynasty in Jordan and Iraq, already referred to above, was also highly significant to explain the events of 1949. The scenario of unification with Jordan ('Greater Syria') or Iraq ('Fertile Crescent') was certainly attractive to some factions in the Syrian military. On the other hand, the Saudi King as Quwatli's closest regional ally was concerned with a potential Hashemite-controlled land bridge between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf as an effort to seal off Saudi Arabia from the rest of the Arab world. He was therefore willing to back

those factions in the Syrian army that were anti-Hashemite (Seale 1965: 47). The anti-Hashemite cause was also supported by France, which at this time still acted as the major supplier of the Syrian army. As a result, different Syrian army factions kept each other in check and no faction managed to gain any decisive advantage. Thus, all three coups of 1949 ultimately failed to realign Syria with any of the neighboring Arab states.

Finally, global factors were also significant to explain the breakdown of constitutional government in Syria. The western powers were certainly interested to limit the decision-making autonomy of nationalist Arab governments such as the one in Syria. To begin with, the US, UK, and France did share economic interests in the Arab world such as shared ownership of the Iraq Petroleum Company. They wanted to run the oil sector in a way that did not allow local Arab states to exercise much countervailing influence.[7] The western powers also shared political interests with regard to the construction of a regional defense organization in order to line up the Arab states against potential Soviet advances in the region. However, the expansion of US economic and political power and parallel decline of British and French positions in the Arab world triggered controversy among the western powers: they each wished their own regional clients to exercise leadership in a regional Arab defense alliance. Thus, British efforts to advance the role of its Hashemite clients in Iraq clashed with American efforts to push for the regional leadership of Saudi Arabia (Gorst and Lucas 1989: 583, 593). In this context of preexisting Anglo-American alliances with local clients, Syria continued to be unaligned and was therefore forced to deal with contradictory and frequently changing western objectives.

The US emerged in this situation as the new regional hegemon in the Middle East and the country's newly acquired power was exercised in a rather experimental manner by bodies such as the CIA. For example, the CIA's encouragement and very likely direct support of Colonel Zaim's 1949 coup was at least partially motivated by efforts to speed up Syria's agreement to the construction of the Tapline pipeline across Syrian territory. Another significant factor was the apparent willingness of Zaim to sign an armistice agreement with Israel and to accept the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in Syria (Rathmell 1995: 38). Thus, US interests were advanced without much concern for local Syrian conditions:

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[7] At the beginning of the 1950s, share ownership of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) was distributed fairly equally between American, British, and French oil interests (Wikipedia, no date). The IPC relied on a pipeline running between Kirkuk in the Kurdish region of Iraq and the Syrian port of Banias. Syrian policymakers frequently challenged the IPC and demanded higher revenue shares in exchange for the right-of-way of the IPC pipeline.

removing the conservative and Saudi-linked Quwatli and replacing him with a military man seemed to offer an easy and convenient way of speeding up Syrian approval of US objectives such as the Tapline pipeline concession.

Directly after Zaim's coup, this strategy appeared to work well. The new military regime quickly moved to adjust Syria's government policy in line with western and especially US objectives. Zaim started a domestic anti-communist campaign; withdrew all Syrian claims against Turkey over the Sanjak of Alexandretta; signed a Syro-Israeli armistice formally ending the 1948 Palestine war; expressed in conversation with the US minister in Damascus a willingness to accept Palestinian refugees for resettlement in Syria; and approved the long-delayed Tapline concession on 16 May 1949, thereby satisfying the commercial interests of the US oil company Aramco (Little 1990a: 57; Rathmell 1995: 37-39). At the same time, Zaim's regime also improved relations with France in order to gain access to more French military assistance (Rathmell 1995: 34-35; Whitman 2011: 21-22). In terms of his regional policy, Zaim focused on continuing Quwatli's course of close relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt to ensure regional backing for his rule and to fend off Hashemite claims on Syria. There were also some efforts to construct a domestic support base beyond military circles when Zaim briefly linked up with the leftist Arab Socialist Party of Akram Hawrani. In summary, Zaim was determined to satisfy highly relevant local, regional, and international constituencies, which appeared to turn him into a serious contender for a stable authoritarian regime backed by the western powers. Nevertheless, Zaim's regime lasted only 137 days and ended with his downfall and execution on 14 August 1949.

The ultimate reason for Zaim's failure was that his domestic political power base remained weak. His erratic personality, perceived as megalomania by some observers, irritated potential western sponsors of his rule and his decision to assume the title of Marshall offended his fellow officers. Equally important, Zaim had made many enemies among the traditional Syrian elite, in Islamic religious circles, and among the followers of the SSNP. In particular, his decision to hand over Antun Saadeh, the founder and leader of the SSNP, to the Lebanese authorities for the latter's alleged role in an earlier SSNP revolt in Lebanon resulted on 8 July 1949 in Saadeh's execution in Beirut. Thus, Zaim's role in facilitating Saadeh's execution turned him into a prime target for retaliation by the SSNP (Rathmell 1995: 46-50). In summary, Zaim offended a critical mass of domestic opponents, thereby uniting them to push for his disposal.

The direct trigger for Zaim's downfall was his plan to move army units to the Jabal Druze (the area to the south of Damascus in which the Druze make up the large majority of inhabitants) to break up the considerable degree of local autonomy of the Druze tribal leaders – an objective that his predecessor Quwatli had earlier failed to achieve (Seale 1965: 74-75; Rathmell 1995: 51; Landis 1998). However, Zaim's threat of a campaign against the Druze was only the final step to motivate a group of officers led by Colonel Sami Hinnawi, commander of the First Brigade, to dispose of Zaim.

The second Syrian military regime of 1949, now chaired by Hinnawi, was backed by a set of SSNP-influenced officers such as Colonel Adib Shishakli, Akram Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party, the Aleppo-based People's Party, and pro-Hashemite Druze leaders. In contrast to Zaim, Hinnawi stressed that he intended to restore a constitutional regime and elections were duly held on 14 August 1949 producing a victory of the Aleppo-based and pro-Iraqi People's Party. However, the solid majority of the People's Party in Parliament proved insufficient to allow Hinnawi to realize his objective of union with Hashemite Iraq. After announcing People's Party plans for union between Syria and Iraq at the beginning of December, another officer group in the Syrian army led by Colonel Shishakli forced Hinnawi on 19 December 1949 to hand over power. In what amounted to the third Syrian military coup in nine months, Shishakli proclaimed that he intended to preserve Syrian independence and the autonomy of the Syrian army that would have been lost in the event of an Iraqi takeover. In line with the blueprint of Zaim's earlier bid for power, the Shishakli-led regime enjoyed CIA support (Weiner 2008: 149) and moved quickly to restore Syria's privileged regional links with Saudi Arabia and Egypt whilst distancing the country from Hashemite Iraq.

Although Shishakli initially stressed his willingness to restore a constitutional regime, the period following his coup continued to be characterized by political instability. From the beginning of 1950 to the end of 1951, seven revolving door civilian governments were formed alternating in turn between National Party and People's Party cabinets. In reaction to this weakness of the two traditional nationalist parties and the civilian politicians, Shishakli once again decided to dissolve Parliament in order to establish a personal dictatorship. (This second dictatorship lasted in turn from the end of 1951 until 25 February 1954, when another military coup forced him out.)

In the period following his second coup, Shishakli frequently expressed his goal to acquire substantial military assistance from the western powers. Similar to Zaim's earlier plans, Shishakli aimed to attract patronage by renewing Syria's concession for Tapline and by

offering to settle Palestinian refugees in Syria. However, Shishakli's hope to exchange such accommodating policies against substantial western (and especially US) military and economic assistance were vetoed in meetings of the Israeli Ambassador in Washington, Abba Eban, with US Secretary of State Dean Acheson. According to the Israeli Ambassador, any military assistance to Syria amounted to a direct threat to Israel. This Israeli intervention proved to be successful with US policymakers while subsequent efforts of Syrian representatives to argue their case were ignored by Washington (Foreign Relations of the United States, no date, Vol. IX: 1088-1094).

In conclusion, the major external reason for the failure of each of the three Syrian dictators to establish a strong regime was that the US, UK, and France all refused to grant substantial military and economic assistance. This collective western rejection of assistance was not due to concern for constitutional government in Syria. Indeed, Syria's more or less constitutional governments between 1946-1949, 1950-1951, 1954-1958, and 1961-1963 were also excluded from economic and military assistance. Rather, the three western powers were already committed to other regional allies in the direct neighborhood of Syria. These pre-existing regional alliances appeared to offer more significant geopolitical returns in comparison with a substantially expanded engagement in Syria. This concerned the US alliances with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the UK's link with Iraq and Jordan, and the French concerns in Lebanon. Equally significant, the western powers were also closely linked with Israel. Thus, from the western geopolitical point of view, Syria appeared to be more trouble than it was worth: any new commitments in Syria were bound to increase costs elsewhere and would have raised concerns among the already existing allies and clients.

The difficulty of the western position is illustrated in an exemplary manner when looking at an extensive British strategic debate on Syria that took place among senior British foreign policy circles in secret memoranda over the duration of the year 1952, i.e. during the first year of General Shishakli's second dictatorship (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 69-106).[8] At this point, the Shishakli regime offered according to some of the British observers good prospects for a stable and potentially pro-western authoritarian regime in Damascus. The strategic problem for the UK was whether or not Syria should be upgraded to the status of a serious British ally. This would have implied to offer Shishakli's regime substantial degrees

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[8] A selection from the secret British diplomatic dispatches on Syria between 1918 and 1973 was published in 2005. However, these new sources have subsequently been ignored in the scholarly literature and the current paper is an exception in this regard.

of military assistance. There were two points of view. On the one hand, it was argued that a more serious engagement with Shishakli was the only way forward to advance British interests. According to the British minister in Damascus, these interests focused on three concerns, namely (1) to add Syria to a western defense alliance in the Arab region; (2) to make Syria accept responsibility for a share of the Palestinian refugees that had fled Palestine at the time of the constitution of the Zionist state; and (3) to protect the western powers' joint oil interests as represented by the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) pipeline that crossed Syrian territory (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 73). Those in favor of engaging Shishakli referred to the country as an 'ultra nationalist' state but argued that 'it may be necessary to supply arms to such States in order to ensure that we have some hope that they will pursue the policies which we approve (…) [T]his may be particularly the case in Syria' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 76). In a similar vein, it was argued that 'confidence will only be gained when the Syrian officer feels that the Western Powers regard him as something more than a policeman' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 90). The same diplomat also stressed that 'I have now reached a point at which I can make no headway here unless I can show (…) that we are interested in building up the Syrian army (…)' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 73). He then hammered home the point that we (i.e. the UK) 'are not giving him [Shishakli] anything that he really wants' and 'before we can set Colonel Shishakli trotting towards the West both the stick and the carrot mist [sic] be applied' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 96-97).

Other British officials dismissed these points, however. They argued that British military assistance for Syria would offer no guaranteed benefits of any kind but was sure to offend Britain's Hashemite Iraqi ally and might trigger security problems for Israel. It was suggested that 'it may sometimes be justified to use a sprat in the form of some armament tidbit to catch a mackerel in the form of political influence to support our Middle East defence planning. But one needs to be sure that one is buying something more than the uncertain support of a transitory regime (…) grave doubts arise as to its expediency from our point of view' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 78). In the end, this British strategic debate on Syria produced no practical results. It appears that there was always some element missing in terms of motivating British policymakers sufficiently. Either the Shishakli regime was judged to be too weak domestically to be worth a serious effort to gain its favor or, alternatively, the British position of taking advantage of the very weakness of the Syrian state to push for

'unity' with Iraq under some British-backed security umbrella was considered to be too difficult to achieve.[9]

4.) Western covert action against Syria: how repeated efforts to unseat the Syrian government pushed the country toward the Soviet Union (1955-1957)

The last section discussed the hesitation of the western powers to offer military and economic assistance to Syria during the Shishakli period. After 1954, however, the western powers changed course with regard to their respective interventions in Syrian affairs. In order to explain this shift from western neglect of Syria toward all-out efforts to unseat the Syrian governments in 1956 and 1957 by means of at least three western-sponsored coup attempts and various sideline plots that included Arab proxies and Turkey, one must first of all take account of the changing regional strategic environment. In 1954 and 1955, it became clear to the western powers that Nasser's leadership of Egypt might change the strategic calculus of Arab politics. The British initially hoped that Nasser would be willing to join a regional Arab defense alliance against the Soviet Union that was supposed to include the close British allies Jordan and Iraq as well as Syria. The Americans, in turn, were more interested to form a 'Northern Tier'' alliance of states bordering the Soviet Union focusing on Pakistan and Turkey.[10] At this point, American strategists still assumed that close personal relationships between Middle Eastern CIA operatives and Nasser, established before the Egyptian revolution, would allow them to exercise guidance over his policies. For his part, Nasser was keen to encourage such American assumptions since he expected to gain more leeway in his dealings with the British in turn (Little 2004: 678). In the event, Nasser first rejected the British-led regional defense alliance and then pushed Britain to negotiate a step-by-step withdrawal of UK troops from the Suez zone. For this purpose, Nasser signed a treaty with Britain on 19 October 1954 that set a time table for the withdrawal of the British garrison from their Suez Base by June 1956.

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[9] The only practical result of the British charm offensive to woo Shishakli was the delivery of two 'Meteor' trainer aircrafts to the Syrian air force in 1952. Another diplomatic dispatch states in this context that 'I am not looking forward to the day he [Shishakli] finds out that the Israelis too are getting Meteors' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 105-106). (More British jets were delivered when the Shishakli regime was already on the way out.)

[10] In February 1955, Iraq and Turkey signed a 'pact of mutual cooperation' (the 'Baghdad Pact'). Later in the year, Britain, Pakistan and Iran also declared their adherence to the pact. The United States signed mutual agreements with each of the member states without formally joining the Pact. The King of Jordan was unable to sign the Pact due to domestic opposition. However, the Iraqi revolution of 1958 resulted in the country's withdrawal from the Pact and neither British nor American strategic objectives were ultimately achieved.

From the UK's point of view, the new Egyptian policies directly challenged the British position in the Middle East. They triggered a strategic shift of British policymakers toward increased reliance on Iraq in order to protect access to the region's oil supplies and pipelines. In this context, Syria gained urgent strategic significance 'not because of any intrinsic value, but because of Britain's attempt to preserve the Iraqi-Jordan axis embodied in the Baghdad Pact' (Pearson 2007: 46) that had been founded in February 1955. Since Egypt had earlier rejected the Baghdad Pact and had subsequently sponsored, jointly with Saudi Arabia, an Arab counter alliance that was competing for political influence in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, the British-led alliance seemed to be under threat. Moreover, the success of left-wing and Arab nationalist parties in Syrian elections in 1954 and 1955 appeared to increase Egyptian (and by extension possibly Soviet) influence in Syria. All these developments questioned the safety of the IPC pipeline that crossed Syrian territory and was absolutely crucial for British transfer of Iraqi oil to Western Europe. The British fear of Syria to 'gravitate towards the Egyptian rather than the Iraqi orbit' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 476) increased further when the new Syrian government under President Asali finally rejected Syrian membership in the Baghdad Pact on 22 February (Gorst and Lucas 1989: 578). At this time, British strategists started to seriously consider Iraqi plans to push for a 'Fertile Crescent' union of Iraq, Syria and Jordan, which would have secured British regional influence but depended on regime change in Syria in order to become a realistic proposition (Pearson 2007: 46).

In the meantime, and inconvenient from the British point of view, Quwatli was once again elected Syrian President. In his first post-election statement in September 1955, he promised to provide the Syrian army with modern equipment and to push for an alliance between Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia to oppose British plans (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 11: 559). Nasser's signing of an arms deal with the Soviet Bloc (the so-called Czech arms deal) on 27 September 1955 and the announcement of similar aspirations by Syrian politicians further intensified British concerns. By October 1955, British and American regional strategists began to converge on the view that the Syrian government should be forced out. Nevertheless, there was still tactical disagreement concerning the role of Iraq in a western takeover of Syrian politics. The US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was particularly keen to avoid the appearance of a direct takeover of Syria by Iraq, although he acknowledged in conversation with his British counterpart Macmillan that 'Syria was the nearest thing in the Middle East to a Soviet satellite' (quoted in Gorst and Lucas 1989: 582). Another British memorandum, issued by the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office on 31 October,

stated with confidence that '[i]n the event that Syria falls under Soviet domination or seems likely to do so, we should encourage the liquidation of the country and its incorporation into Iraq' (Kirkpatrick, quoted in Gorst and Lucas 1989: 582).

The two western powers now started to coordinate their efforts to deal with the Egyptian and Syrian challenges. The general framework for joint action was 'Project Omega' that amounted to 'a secret blueprint for combating revolutionary nationalism throughout the Arab world' (Little 2004: 675). President Eisenhower's approval of the Omega project on 28 March 1956 overlapped with the joint preparation, by British and American intelligence agencies, for a coup in Syria, termed 'Operation Straggle'. Preparation of the coup was considered to be of the highest priority due to parallel developments in Egypt. Here, Nasser reacted to the withdrawal of British and American funding promises for the Aswan Dam with the decision to nationalize the British and French controlled Suez Canal Company on 26 July. This decision started the escalation toward the Suez Crisis which resulted in the Israeli and subsequent joint Franco-British invasion of Egypt on 29 October. The background of the escalation of the Egyptian crisis explains why the western planners were keen to force out the Syrian government in order to limit Nasser's ability to project his leadership across the Arab world.

In order to summarize subsequent western covert action against the Syrian government between 1956 and 1957, one needs to first of all acknowledge that many sources are still closed for research. The secrecy surrounding the operations continues to constrict the historiography of this crucial period of Syrian history.[11] Thus, to explain convincingly how Syria was pushed toward the Soviet Union during this period, one needs to 'map' the various western plots and subplots implemented between 1956 and 1957 in their entirety. The historiography suggests that three main covert operations took place out of which two were joint Anglo-American. These were in temporal order (1) 'Operation Straggle', a joint British and American operation that took place between March and October 1956 and ended in the

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[11] For example, a recent handbook of Middle Eastern Intelligence provides only brief coverage of the scope of western operations in Syria focusing only on two of arguably at least five operations (Kahana and Suwaed 2009: 246-248). Another recent history of American interventionism against nationalist governments in developing countries fails to mention CIA efforts to unseat Syrian governments in 1956 and 1957 (Sullivan III 2008). Finally, the most current history of the CIA provides a very brief summary of US contacts with Shishakli that fails to sum up the existing literature in claiming too much ('the CIA *installed ...* Shishakli as the Syria leader' (emphasis added)) while not providing any detail on how the CIA might have been able to do so. The subsequent CIA operations in 1956 and 1957 are also explained in a way that does not allow readers to understand the strategic objectives motivating the agency (Weiner 2008: 159-161).

uncovering of the plot by Syrian intelligence; (2) 'Operation Wappen', the CIA's unilateral effort to recruit right-wing dissidents inside of the Syrian army for a coup that would bring back Shishakli as dictator of Syria that was in turn uncovered by Syrian intelligence on 12 August 1957; (3) the 'Preferred Plan', another combined effort of the two western powers that was put forward in September 1957 in order to promote unrest within Syria to be followed by armed incursions from neighboring countries and the assassination of Syrian key political and military figures that had stopped the two earlier coup attempts; (4) American unilateral efforts to encourage Turkey to invade Syria after August 1957; (5) British efforts at various points in time to promote Jordanian and/or Iraqi attacks on Syria in order to force through earlier British plans for the Baghdad Pact.

If there was any common denominator explaining these covert operations, it amounted to British and American willingness to pursue 'trial-and-error' tactics in the hope that a weak spot in Syrian defense efforts could be found. In turn, Syria's defense against western covert action, and parallel efforts of Nasser and the Syrians to exercise countervailing influence in neighboring Jordan and Lebanon, were regularly labeled by the western powers as evidence of Egyptian and Syrian aggression which, it was claimed, ultimately took place on behalf of the Kremlin. What resulted was a circle of aggression, counter-aggression, and counter-counter-aggression in which the western powers and Syrian counter intelligence traded punches. This sequence of events only ended once Syria escaped further destabilization by unification with Egypt in the United Arab Republic.

Briefly sketching the various plans for a Syrian coup in turn, 'Operation Straggle', the first coup effort, remains difficult to pin down today due to the sheer number of potential coup candidates considered by the western powers. They included pro-Iraqi factions of the SSNP (the scenario preferred by the British); a leader of 'Syrian moderates' with contacts in the Syrian army (the scenario preferred by the Americans); the restoration of Shishakli to power (also considered by the Americans); mobilization of pro-Iraqi tribes to allow Iraq a takeover of Syria; and plans to engineer border incidents on the Syrian-Turkish border in order to facilitate a Turkish military attack on Syria (Saunders 1996: 48-51; Little 2004: 674-676). All these scenarios failed, however, since the coup date was fixed for 29 October 1956. On this very day, Israeli troops started their attack on Egypt triggering the Suez Crisis. Thus, plans for the Syrian coup were hastily abandoned. (In Syrian historiography, these events are termed the 'Iraqi Coup', due to the involvement of Iraqi-sponsored SSNP members in this first round of failed coup efforts.)

In the second round, the CIA made efforts to identify politically conservative dissidents in the Syrian army in order to have them conduct a US-backed coup. This operation, termed 'Operation Wappen' in CIA documents and known as the 'American Plot' in Syrian accounts, appears to have been triggered by the arrival of CIA operative Howard Stone in Damascus in June 1957. Yet the plan proved to be another fiasco: the CIA-targeted Syrian army members informed Syrian counter-intelligence and, on 12 August 1957, the US embassy in Damascus was surrounded by the Syrian authorities. This resulted in Stone's arrest and his subsequent 'confession' of the plot to the Syrians (Little 2004: 677).[12] There is some evidence to suggest that Shishakli was once again considered by the US as a candidate to front a post-coup junta (Rathmell 1995: 139). Yet due to the particularly clumsy nature of the operation, there is consensus in the literature that 'Operation Wappen' 'actually strengthened the hand of anti-Western forces' (Little 2004: 677, see also Saunders 1996: 55).

Between August and October 1957, the crisis in Syria continued to escalate. Unwilling to accept failure in their efforts to unseat the Syrian government, British embassy staff in Washington and American intelligence operatives, including Kermit Roosevelt, reorganized their cooperation by forming a 'Syria Working Group'. The group's report, put forward on 18 September 1957 and 'receiving the endorsement of the most senior political leaders in the US and British governments' (Jones 2004: 409), converged in a 'Preferred Plan' (a term used in the report's preface) to stir up disturbances within Syria followed by border incidents involving Iraq and/or Jordan. This was expected to serve as a pretext for Iraqi military action against Syria under the self-defense provision of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, combined with efforts to encourage Bedouin tribes and Druze elements in the Syrian army to rise up against the Syrian national government. The document suggested the setting-up of a Jordan-based 'Free Syria Committee' and recommended the targeted assassination of some key Syrian army and intelligence figures as crucial for the successful conclusion of the operation (Jones 2004: 405-408). Just as in the case of the two earlier operations, the 'Preferred Plan' proved infeasible. This was due to a combination of factors such as a lack of support for western plans within Syria and the short time frame available for coup action before the beginning of the rainy season in November. Moreover, western observers were

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[12] There exists disagreement in the literature about the extent of coordination of US and UK coup efforts in Syria. Some authors argue that another unilateral American operation, termed 'Operation Wakeful,' took place in the context of 'Wappen' while others consider 'Wakeful' to constitute an independent US operation without the participation of British intelligence (see Prados 2006 163-164; and Pearson 2007: 48).

agreed that Iraqi and Jordanian armies 'did not possess the short-term military capability to overcome anything above token Syrian resistance' (Jones 2004: 406).

In parallel with the 'Preferred Plan,' the US also considered backing unilateral Turkish moves to engage in a military invasion of Syria. When Turkish troops began a military build-up on the Syrian border in mid-September, the US sixth fleet was moved to the Syrian coast to provide for additional military back-up. However, this 'Turkish alternative' (a term suggested by Pearson 2007 to describe what could have been an alternative scenario to unseat the Syrian government) suffered from serious shortcomings, such as the potential of a Turkish attack to stir up pan-Arab nationalist sentiments in favor of Syria. In fact, war between Turkey and Syria would have threatened the IPC pipeline that crossed through Syria and would therefore have hurt the economic interests of Hashemite Iraq as the leading British client in the region (Pearson 2007: 49-50).

In the end, neither the 'Preferred Plan' nor the 'Turkish alternative' took off. Instead, the Americans turned back toward diplomacy and pushed the Saudi leadership to act as an alternative to Nasser's version of Arab nationalism. This shift allowed the return toward intra-Arab diplomacy. Most importantly, however, a general balance of threats at the regional and global level had emerged: Turkey experienced Soviet pressure to stop its mobilization drive on the Syrian border while Nasser used this opportunity to land a small detachment of Egyptian troops in the Syrian harbor city of Latakia on 13 October. Since Nasser's initiative was in effect backed up by the Soviet Union, a Turkish invasion of Syria was by now considered to be too dangerous from the western point of view (Lesch 1996: 139).

Ultimately, the Syrian crisis fizzled out once it became clear that all scenarios to push out the Syrian government were doomed to failure. Neither was Saudi Arabia able to take over Nasser's leadership role in the Arab world nor were the western allies Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon in a position to take over Syria militarily (Lesch 1996: 140-141; Pearson 2007: 54). As soon as Turkey and the Soviet Union mended their fences, the tide of events shifted back toward direct diplomatic exchanges between Nasser and the Americans. Nasser now announced that he, too, was concerned about rising communist influence in Syria. Some degree of consensus arose that the 'Soviet threat' in Syria was represented by Army Chief Bizri and by Khalid al-Azm, a six-time prime minister of Syria, who was at the time backed as a potential presidential contender by the Syrian Communists. Following Nasser's tactical rapprochement with US interests, the Egyptian leader asked his supporters in Syria to form a united front with the Baathists to strengthen the political center and to guard against further

coup attempts from leftist and rightist forces. This operation proved a success: the Syrian Baath Party started supporting Nasser's project of union with Egypt as a way to block further advances of the Syrian Communists.

On 12 January 1958, a delegation of Syrian army officers flew to Cairo and the United Arab Republic, the union of Egypt and Syria, was declared after brief negotiations on 1 February 1958. Thus, unification with Egypt proved the ultimate safeguard to allow Syria a degree of protection against external threats, although as part of a larger political entity. Yet this political course was only feasible because the Soviet Union had pushed up Egyptian and Syrian military strength since 1956 and continued to act as the military patron of the United Arab Republic after 1958. (The Soviet willingness to support Nasser despite the latter's heavy-handed repression against Egyptian and Syrian Communists underlined that the Soviet leadership was more interested in acquiring regional geopolitical influence rather than the direct takeover of Arab states.)

In the final analysis, the US- and UK-led 1956-1957 destabilization of Syria must be understood as the outcome of earlier western decisions to allow Syria only weak degrees of political autonomy and statehood. The post-independence Syrian civilian and military leaders understood, at least to some extent, that western policymakers were keen to appeal to Syria's minority communities with a history of autonomous decision-making, such as the Druze, and to representatives of regions with a history of close links with neighboring countries, such as the Aleppo-based People's Party aligned to Hashemite Iraq, in their efforts to weaken the Syrian central state and Syria's national army. Most of Syria's political leaders in the late 1940s and early 1950s were therefore pushed to strengthen Syria's statehood and independence in order to discourage plans of the two Hashemite countries, Jordan and Iraq, to enforce 'Arab unity' by way of a take-over of Syria. Yet the western powers never accepted this reasoning of Syria's historical nationalist leadership. Instead, they claimed to be concerned about a potential arms race among the Arab states and between the Arabs and Israel.

However, the western policy of restraint and 'evenhandedness', enshrined in the 'Tripartite Declaration' of 1950 on arms exports to the region between the US, Britain and France, was by no means neutral. First, it offered Britain and France a near monopoly of supply of military goods to the Arab states and, in the case of France, to Israel – at least as long as the US followed their stated objective of avoiding significant arms transfers to the region. Second, it ignored extensive US economic assistance to Israel since the early 1950s, which made the US from the very beginning the main economic patron of Israel. Third,

France, with tacit US agreement, allowed Israel access to nuclear secrets which turned the country into the Middle East's only state with nuclear arms. Fourth, the SIPRI arms transfer data base for the years 1950 to 1957 (see appendix, pre-1950 data is not available) underlines that western and especially French arms deliveries to Israel made parallel delivery of weapons to Syria extremely insignificant by comparison. Although British arms deliveries to the region were slightly more even-handed, especially when factoring in delivery to Iraq and Jordan, the then Arab client states of the UK, it is clear that the Syrian army never enjoyed support from any western power on a scale that would have had strategic significance while Israel quickly gained the ascendancy.[13]

Conversely, the policy of tacit western boycott of Syria's military was the main reason for the absence of western networks of influence within the Syrian army. Judged with the advantage of hindsight, the revolution in military affairs of the 1950s in the Middle East concerned the success or failure of Arab states to acquire the trappings of a modern army. At this time, the most significant task was to construct an air force and to equip it with jet fighters that were then representing the cutting edge of strategic power. If one looks back at the track record of the Syrian military, it is clear that Shishakli was keen to deliver these objectives but was kept out in the cold by the US administration while receiving only token support from Britain. Yet as soon as Nasser linked up with the Soviet Union, Egypt started to receive quick and relevant military assistance from the Kremlin including access to the most advanced Soviet jet fighters. Due to the Egyptian example, it became clear that the Soviet road was the only one available to the Syrian military in order to gain a regional strategic role. In this context, western military analysts acknowledged that the quick delivery to Syria of MiG-15 and MiG-17 Soviet jet fighters in 1956 and early in 1957 changed the strategic calculus in the Middle East and allowed Syria to deter a possible invasion from neighboring countries such as Iraq (Rathmell 1995: 141).

Once the Soviet deliveries had arrived, western analysts realized that '[t]he Soviet bloc build-up of Syria does not appear to be a short-term project…. There appears…no restriction on what the Syrians can order…. The quantities of aircraft and arms talked of by Syria are more than her armed forces can absorb in the immediate future. They are not, however,

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[13] As for the interpretation of SIPRI data, one must stress that military supplies to Syria during the period, such as the Italian G-55 and G-59 fighter planes, were mostly leftover caches from WW2 and already obsolete in the era of jet fighters. The policy of tacit western boycott of the Syrian military in the late 1940s and early 1950s underlines that the country was destined to follow the Lebanese example, where the national army never developed beyond the status of a militia and has subsequently been unable to defend the national territory.

excessive on the assumption that the army and air force are to be completely re-equipped with Soviet equipment' (Records of Syria 2005, Vol. 12: 150-151). In summary, Syria's turn to the Soviet Union, in line with the earlier Egyptian example, allowed the country to acquire the patronage necessary to become a serious regional power. The parallel strengthening of the Syrian military and Syrian state by the Soviet Union since the second half of the 1950s had geopolitical significance that continues to influence Middle East politics today.

5. The trajectory of post-independence Syria between 1946 and 1958: seven major explanatory factors

When Syria emerged as an independent country from the French Mandate in 1946, it immediately acquired an outcast role since it was the only major state in the region that was not directly linked to the western powers by way of patron-client relationships. (Neighboring Lebanon, the other country in the Levant region without any clear-cut external sponsorship, was divided along sectarian lines and never played much of an independent role in Arab politics ever since its independence in 1943.) For the purpose of political analysis, the first cycle of Syria's statehood between the date of independence on 17 April 1946 and the time of the country's unification with Egypt on 8 February 1958 to form the United Arab Republic can be divided into three distinct time periods, namely (1) a weak formally democratic regime from 1946 to 1949; (2) a period of punctuated authoritarian rule between 1949 and 1954; and (3) a return to a weak formally democratic regime between 1954 and 1957.

The first period covers the weak republican democratic government of the country's first President Quwatli. This was followed by the period of the three military leaders (Zaim and Hinnawi in 1949 and Shishakli between 1949 and 1950 and from 1951 to 1954, respectively). Each of these authoritarian rulers aspired to set up a stable regime, yet they all ultimately lacked the domestic and external sources of support that would have been necessary in order to achieve their authoritarian goals. While Shishakli was more sophisticated than his two colleagues in efforts to gain US endorsement for his rule, none of the Syrian candidates ultimately received western endorsement. Crucially, this rejection was by no means due to concern on the part of the western powers over issues of democracy versus dictatorship; rather the western powers were hesitant to prop up *any* Syrian leadership, whether notionally democratic or not, for fear of weakening regional stability in general and the emerging military dominance of Israel in particular. At the same time, the western powers were united in expecting Syrian leaders to endorse western oil pipeline projects such as

Aramco's Trans-Arabian Pipeline and the IPC's Kirkuk-Banias Pipeline, both highly significant for American and British oil business, in a timely manner and without too much bargaining on the part of the Syrians. They also pushed for Syrian acceptance of the resettlement of Palestinian refugees who had been forced from their land due to the creation of the Zionist state. Last but not least, the western powers demanded that Syrian leaders should sign up for regional defense alliances against a perceived Soviet threat such as the Middle East Command, Middle East Defense Association, and Baghdad Pact, respectively. In this context, the western powers claimed to fear the emergence of a geopolitical 'vacuum' in Syria which was in turn blamed on the country's 'ultranationalism' (a term initially coined by British diplomats to describe Quwatli's presidency). Ultimately, the western powers feared that the alliance between Nasser and the Soviets would challenge American and British regional dominance in the Middle East.

What the western powers were unwilling to recognize, however, was that Syria's outcast status and the resulting 'vacuum' were very much of their own making. If the United States would have been willing to offer military and economic assistance, the country would certainly have been in a particularly good position to establish privileged relationships with Syria. This was certainly true for the duration of Shishakli's rule and probably would have also applied for other windows of opportunity to engage Syria, such as in the time period directly after the Franco-British and Israeli attack on Nasser's Egypt in 1956, when the American rejection of Franco-British 'colonialism' allowed for a short honeymoon between the US and some Arab nationalist leaders.

However, Syrian leaders' initial openness to US assistance in their state building efforts was ultimately abandoned because of the Anglo-American destabilization efforts of 1956 and 1957. By this time, the Syrian governments of the day felt that the repeated coup efforts of Anglo-American operators were evidence for the western powers' interest to rule Syria by dictate. In fact, the three covert actions for western takeover of Syria, namely the joint British-American coup plan of 1956 ('Operation Straggle'); the 'Turkish plot' of 1957; and the 'Operation Wappen' also known as the 'American Plot' in Syrian historiography (Rathmell 1995: 136-143; Kahana and Suwaed 2009: 246-248) all underlined that western geopolitical interests did not allow for any significant degree of Syrian autonomy. After each of these failed operations, the western powers in general and the US in particular lost more of what had remained of their influence within Syria.

In summary, several factors explain why Syria was first pushed toward Nasser's Egypt and then toward long-term geopolitical alignment with the Soviet Union: four global, one Arab regional, and two domestic Syrian factors explicate the country's outcast role in the region when looked at from the point of view of the US and the other western powers.

The four global factors were as follows: (1) lack of policy coordination of the three relevant western powers, i.e. the US, Britain, and France toward Syria; (2) unwillingness on the part of the western powers to accept Arab (and Syrian) nationalism as a genuine third force in the early Cold War era and failure to offer relevant military and economic assistance; (3) backlash within Syria against US and British covert action in 1956 and 1957 that failed to unseat Syria's leadership and destroyed what had remained of western influence among the Syrian elite; and (4) countervailing willingness of the Soviet Union to pursue limited objectives in the Middle East which offered Syrian political leaders an attractive alternative to western patronage.

Firstly, the three western states failed to effectively coordinate their regional and Syria policies. France was initially very reluctant to leave Syria and applied military force in efforts to extract economic and military concessions from Syria's nationalist leadership in 1945 and 1946. However, Syrian resistance and an informal Anglo-American alliance jointly removed France as a stakeholder in the Levant. In the early 1950s, France reappeared in the area as the principal military supplier of Israel; yet this move made it impossible for France to regain substantial influence with any of the Middle Eastern Arab states (Mott 2002: 177). Britain as the second European power in the region principally aimed to defend the status quo and focused on efforts to sustain privileged relationships with its Hashemite clients in Jordan and Iraq. In 1952, UK policymakers seriously considered adding Syria to the fold (see the debate in senior British foreign policy circles during Shishakli's rule discussed above). Yet most senior Syrian policymakers continued to reject closer links with the neighboring Hashemite countries since they considered them to constitute the principal danger to Syria's statehood and independence. The same Syrian policymakers also declined to join the British-sponsored Baghdad Pact in 1955 and, after the 1956 Suez disaster, Britain lost the ability to exercise independent regional leadership (Walt 1987: 59).

By contrast, the sometime US posture as a principled opponent of European colonialism in the Middle East was due to the country's lack of interest in burdening itself with the fate of the two declining European powers. At this time, the US did not require Middle Eastern oil supplies while Britain and other Western European countries needed them

in order to facilitate the economic recovery of Western Europe. Thus, US policymakers consciously refused to offer substantial military assistance to any of the Arab countries and US Defense Secretary Lovett summed up his country's position in 1952 stating that the Arabs should only receive 'limited quantities of non-competitive (obsolete) items of military equipment' (Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol. IX, Part 2: 2335). Overall, the Americans did not rush to formally take over British positions; they could be confident that the laws of political gravity would allow them to soon replace what remained of British regional influence. In this context, the British failure to install political and military alliances in the early to mid-1950s to reorganize the Arab region as part of a Cold War front against the Soviet Union, most notably the Baghdad Pact, did not concern the US too much. After all, American power could also be exercised in direct bilateral relationships with the Arab states, Turkey, and Israel.

The second factor explaining the failure of the western powers to establish a strong position in Syria was their collective rejection to engage with Arab (and Syrian) nationalism. In this context, Nasser's policy of 'positive neutrality' of Egypt in the Cold War – i.e. the unwillingness of Nasser to take sides in the global geopolitical confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union – was misunderstood as a smoke screen for communist subversion or even a communist takeover by proxy. The US failed to understand Nasser's skillful use of the Cold War context, soon to be copied by the Syrians, to extract economic and military assistance from the Soviet Union while avoiding any alliance with local communist forces. As for Syria, Britain was unable to act due to its preexisting regional alliances with Jordan and Iraq. The US, too, failed to fill the gap and did not make any genuine offers to any of the Syrian leaders in the early 1950s. This was made clear in a crucial personal exchange between US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and Syria's ruler General Shishakli that occurred in the American Embassy in Damascus on 16 May 1953. When Shishakli used the opportunity to make his case for US military assistance to build up the Syrian army, Dulles first voiced concern for Israel's security and then fell back on technicalities in order to avoid any direct engagement with the issue at hand. In this context, Shishakli made the reasonable point that 'it would not be wise to get involved in a "vicious circle" where Syria cannot receive United States aid until it gives a specific undertaking or engagement, while on the other hand Syria cannot give an undertaking or engagement until it is assured of a program which meets its requirements' (Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol. 10, Part I: 64, emphasis added; see also Saunders 1996: 23-25). By way of reply, 'Mr. Stassen [Director of the US Mutual

Security Agency] said he believed this could be made by a step-by-step approach to the problem. General Shishakli said that *the problem was really to find a point in the circle from which to start*' (Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol. 10, Part I: 64, emphasis added). Of course the right point in the circle was never found.

The third factor explaining the western powers' failure in Syria was the short-termism of Britain and the US in their dealings with the Syrian leaders. Both powers failed to establish strong networks of influence and the various western coup attempts in Syria between 1956 and 1957 had the unintended consequence of increasing the influence of the Nasserist and Baathist forces in the Syrian army at the expense of potentially pro-western conservative elements. In fact, even conservative Syrian nationalist leaders were now keen to distance themselves from the western powers. President Quwatli, for example, went so far to label the US an 'overt foe' in July 1957, which made the US Chargé d'Affaires issue the countercharge that his speech was 'indistinguishable from Communist propaganda' (cited in Rathmell 1995: 136). Thus, the western powers had hardly any friends left in Syria in the second half of the 1950s.

The fourth factor explaining western failure in Syria in the 1950s was the countervailing role of the Soviet Union. From the Soviet perspective, the Middle East was a new geopolitical region to enter and Soviet policy was not informed by the long track record of imperial rule in the manner in which British and French regional expertise trickled down to US policymakers. Thus, the Soviet Union pursued limited objectives in comparison to the US, namely to acquire a power stake in the Middle East by way of privileged relations with friendly regimes rather than a communist takeover that was never a realistic objective for the Egyptian and Syrian CP's and would have inevitably resulted in direct confrontation with the US. Moreover, Soviet strategists knew that the previous unwillingness of the western powers to construct patron-client relationships with Egyptian and Syrian leaders had opened the door for them. For example, the six-time Syrian Prime Minister Khalid al-Azm praised the Soviets in 1957 stating that '[t]he U.S.S.R. has given us political support and supplied us with arms, which we were completely unable to obtain from countries other than the U.S.S.R.' (al-Azm, quoted in Ro'i 1973: 232). Between 1955 and 1957, the Syrian army quickly acquired a serious air force based on large numbers of advanced Soviet MiG jet fighters (see SIPRI data in the Appendix below). This dispatch of Soviet military assistance immediately strengthened Syria's regional standing and, together with explicit Soviet warnings to Turkey, helped to deter Turkey from a potential military attack on Syria in 1957 (Lesch 1996: 137-139). Once

committed, the Soviets were willing to build up the client armies of Egypt and Syria in a sustained manner, which, in turn, allowed the military to become the dominant actor in domestic politics. In this sense, the Soviet Union's intervention in the Middle East in the 1950s had a lasting impact on the behavior of all other states in the region.

In addition to the four global factors, one regional Arab and two domestic Syrian factors also explain the trajectory of the Syrian state between 1946 and 1958. At the regional level, the emergence of at least notionally independent Arab states after WW2 produced a new balance of power in the Levant and on the Arab peninsula. Two sets of states contested for regional hegemony: an alliance made up of Egypt and Saudi Arabia faced another camp consisting of Hashemite Jordan and Iraq. Syria developed quickly into the main site of contestation for this intra-Arab leadership conflict. Thus, the Sykes-Picot borderlines, imposed by Britain and France in order to divide and rule the Arabs, did serve their function as judged from the point of view of the western powers. Syria emerged as a swing state in this regional balance; yet all efforts by outsiders to make Syria join either of the two camps ultimately failed. This was due to the fact that 'Arab unity' along 'Greater Syria' or 'Fertile Crescent' lines (i.e. unification with Hashemite Jordan or Hashemite Iraq, respectively) was never accepted by a decisive majority of Syrians. Rather, the highly mixed ethnic and sectarian composition of Syria forced domestic policymakers to first and foremost stabilize their own state. In this effort, they looked for support from those Arab states that were least likely to demand the takeover of their country by way of 'unity'.

This explains why Syria's post-independence leaders were keen to receive Egyptian and Saudi support, were fairly open for US assistance at various times in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and were generally critical of Hashemite and British power considered to be a danger to Syrian independence. The two Hashemite states, in turn, certainly tried to gain influence within Syria too. Yet the project of unifying Syria with Iraq that was advanced by the Aleppo-based People's Party and briefly became official Syrian government policy during Hinnawi's rule in 1949 – or indeed any other unity project – would certainly have produced new internal divisions. Moreover, the western powers also rejected Arab unity projects and British policymakers genuinely preferred Arab regional stability compared to the expansion of power of their Hashemite clients by way of a takeover of Syria. After the Suez disaster in 1956, British policymakers reconsidered the Syrian issue but such efforts came too late in the day. The same applied to US efforts to push the Saudi King as an alternative regional leader against Nasser and for parallel attempts to bring back General Shishakli as figurehead of a

pro-American regime in Syria during one of the 1957 coup attempts. In summary, British and American regional policymakers failed to use the windows of opportunity that had been available in Syria before 1956 and that were no longer available once the Soviet Union entered the Middle East as a competing power.

Finally, two domestic Syrian factors must also be considered to explain Syria's trajectory between 1946 and 1958. First, one must take account of the extraordinary weakness of the postcolonial Syrian state, which was characterized by domestic conflict between different ethnic and sectarian groups, weak central authority, and a weak political class consisting of representatives of the landed aristocracy unable to accommodate to modern mass politics. In order to retain power in a difficult environment, Syria's first President Quwatli relied on regional alliances with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to support him against his Hashemite adversaries. However, these alliances were never endorsed and backed up by British and American policymakers. While Quwatli's conservative political views might have marked him out for western support under a different set of circumstances, they ultimately failed to protect his presidency because he insisted on his own autonomy and business interests. In the eyes of US and UK policymakers, Quwatli's behavior showed the latter's unwillingness to enter into a patron-client relationship. This made his presidency vulnerable and he was easily removed by Zaim's 1949 army coup.

The second domestic factor concerned the issue of army power in the context of a weak state. Between 1949 and 1954, three military officers (Zaim, Hinnawi, and Shishakli, respectively) pursued efforts to replace the civilian institutions and to become 'strong men' backed up by the military. They all hoped to turn the strong domestic position of the army into a launch pad to stabilize Syrian statehood. Yet two of the three contenders for the position of authoritarian leader were personally very weak. Zaim lacked a sophisticated understanding of politics and his efforts to monopolize power quickly became a source of concern for his fellow officers. When Hinnawi subsequently replaced Zaim, he was little more than a coincidental figure gaining power without a program. His only significant initiative was to advocate for Syria's unity with Iraq ('Fertile Crescent'); yet this proposal directly triggered his own downfall and his short period at the top of Syrian politics did not influence subsequent events.

By comparison, the third contender for power, Shishakli, was a much more serious figure who tried to bargain with the UK and US in a sophisticated manner courting their endorsement and patronage. The main objective of Shishakli was to receive western military

and economic assistance in order to stabilize the Syrian state. In the context of the early 1950s, this concerned in particular the creation of a credible air force as a new branch of the Syrian army in line with similar efforts in neighboring Arab countries and in Israel. However, the western powers' rejection to consider delivery of relevant military assets underlined that Shishakli was not considered valuable enough to deserve endorsement from outside. In fact, Shishakli simply could not offer one-sided accommodation of western objectives, such as the agreement to permanently settle Palestinian refugees in Syria, without receiving anything in return in terms of western pressure on Israel to follow the relevant UN resolutions that would have addressed some of the Arabs' legitimate grievances. This limit in Shishakli's willingness to please western interests was driven by concerns over his own standing in Syrian domestic politics. His power base was ultimately not strong enough to impose policies that would have offended the mainstream Arab nationalist opinion of the time. Thus, when US policymakers pointedly refused to take the first step in providing military supplies for Syria, Shishakli had nowhere else to go. He subsequently suffered the same fate as his civilian and military predecessors in the role of Syrian state leader: his own domestic support base crumbled and his regime suffered breakdown.

Conclusion

In summary, all civilian and military efforts to stabilize the Syrian state after independence in 1946 failed due to a combination of the Cold War conflict, intra-Arab contests over regional hegemony, and Syrian domestic conflicts. These different levels of instability jointly weakened the ability of all domestic Syrian regimes between 1946 and 1958 to acquire substantial resources in the military and economic fields to back up the country's independence. Syria as a weak state became the object of foreign interference, while domestic actors lacked the capability to strengthen the system from within. This changed, however, when Egypt emerged as the center of independent Arab political strength under Nasser's leadership. The emerging strategic alliance between Nasser and the Soviet Union was soon extended to Syria and the country was able to leave behind some of the chronic instability that had characterized the period 1946-1958.

Yet the 'cure' for the weaknesses of the Syrian state was – just as in the case of Egypt – only preparing the ground for new powerful challenges. Increasing the strength and political influence of the military resulted in structural domination of the state by the military – with lasting repercussions on the politics of Egypt and Syria until the present. In addition, Syria's

relative isolation in the region once again became apparent when US policymakers managed to regain control of Egypt's leadership in the mid-1970s during Anwar Sadat's rule, thereby breaking the balance between the Arabs and Israel in favor of Syria's main opponent. Thus, the geopolitical accident of Syria's emergence as an independent but weak country, lacking stable geopolitical patronage and aligning itself with the weaker of the two super powers for lack of any viable alternative, set the scene for the dramatic challenges forced upon the Syrian people today.

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Appendix:

Transfers of major conventional weapons: sorted by supplier. Deals with deliveries or orders made for year range 1950 to 1957 to Israel and Syria

Note: The 'No. delivered/produced' and the 'Year(s) of deliveries' columns refer to all deliveries since the beginning of the contract. Deals in which the recipient was involved in the production of the weapon system are listed separately. The 'Comments' column includes publicly reported information on the value of the deal. Information on the sources and methods used in the collection of the data, and explanations of the conventions, abbreviations and acronyms, can be found at URL <http://www.sipri.org/contents/armstrad/at_data.html>. The SIPRI Arms Transfers Database is continuously updated as new information becomes available.

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

Information generated: 31 August 2013

Supplier/ recipient (R) or licenser (L)	No. ordered	Weapon designation	Weapon description	Year of order/ licence	Year(s) of deliveries	No. delivered/ produced	Comments
France							
R: Israel	(100)	M-3/M-5 Half-track	APC	(1949)	1950-1951	(100)	Ex-French
	(40)	M-4 Sherman	Tank	(1951)	1952	(40)	Ex-French; M-4A4 version
	(44)	Mosquito FB-6	Bomber aircraft	(1951)	1951-1953	(44)	Ex-French
	(19)	Mosquito NF-30	Fighter aircraft	(1951)	1951	19	Ex-French
	(5)	MH-1521 Broussard	Light aircraft	(1952)	1953	(5)	
	(100)	AMX-13/75	Light tank	(1953)	1955-1956	(100)	Possibly incl 40 ex-French
	(250)	M-4 Sherman	Tank	(1953)	1953-1954	(250)	Ex-French
	(60)	AMX Mk-61 105mm	Self-propelled gun	(1954)	1955-1956	(60)	Possibly ex-French
	(150)	M-3/M-5 Half-track	APC	(1954)	1956	(150)	Ex-French; incl some M-2 version; no. could be up to 300
	(12)	T-17E1 Staghound	Armoured car	(1954)	1954	(12)	Ex-French
	(1)	DC-3/C-47 Skytrain	Transport aircraft	(1955)	1955	(1)	Ex-French
	(75)	MD-450 Ouragan	FGA aircraft	(1955)	1955-1956	(75)	Incl some 42-63 ex-French (but maximum only 3 years old); ordered after Czechoslovak sale of MiG-15 to Egypt, Canadian refusal to sell F-86 and 24 French Mystere-2 cancelled; interim solution until delivery of Mystere-4 from France
	(6)	Noratlas	Transport aircraft	1955	1956	(6)	N-2501IS version
	(1000)	SS-10	Anti-tank missile	(1955)	1956-1959	(1000)	
	37	Mystere-4A	Fighter aircraft	1956	1956	37	Part of $80 m deal
	24	Mystere-4A	Fighter aircraft	1956	1956	24	Originally 24 Mystere-2 planned but changed to Mystere-4 after Mystere-2 found unreliable

Syria	(7)	Ju-52/3m	Transport aircraft	(1949)	1950	(7)	Ex-French
	(6)	DC-3/C-47 Skytrain	Transport aircraft	(1950)	1950	(6)	Ex-French

UK

R: Israel	(25)	Cromwell	Tank	(1949)	1950-1951	(25)	Ex-UK
	2	Flower	Corvette	1949	1950	2	Ex-UK; Israeli designation Wedgewood
	(100)	M-3/M-5 Half-track	APC	(1949)	1950-1951	(100)	Ex-UK
	1	Mosquito FB-6	Bomber aircraft	1950	1950	1	Ex-UK; original order for 6 cancelled after crash of first on delivery flight
	(5)	Anson	Trainer aircraft	(1951)	1952	(5)	Second-hand
	4	Mosquito PR-6	Reconnaissance ac	1951	1951	4	Ex-French aircraft bought via UK
	15	Meteor	Fighter aircraft	(1953)	1953	15	Ex-UK; Meteor Mk-8 version; incl 4 Meteor T-7 trainer version
	9	Meteor	Fighter aircraft	(1954)	1955	(9)	Ex-UK; Meteor FR-9 reconnaissance version
	(12)	Hercules	Aircraft engine	1955	1956	(12)	For 6 Noratlas transport aircraft from France; Hercules-738 version; from French production line
	6	Meteor NF-11	Fighter aircraft	(1955)	1956	6	Ex-UK, Meteor NF-13 version
	(75)	Nene	Turbojet	1955	1955-1956	(75)	For 75 MD-450 Ouragan combat aircraft from France; produced in France
	2	EWP	Destroyer	1956	1956	2	Ex-UK; Z version; Israeli designation Elath
	(61)	RB-44 Tay	Turbojet	1956	1956	(61)	For 61 Mystere-4 combat aircraft from France; Verdon-350 version produced in France
Syria	(30)	Merlin	Aircraft engine	1949	1950	(30)	For 30 G-59 combat aircraft from Italy
	(1)	F-24	Light aircraft	(1950)	1951	(1)	Second-hand
	12	Meteor	Fighter aircraft	1950	1952-1953	(12)	Meteor F-8 version; delivery embargoed 1950-1952
	2	Meteor	Fighter aircraft	1952	1952	2	Ex-UK; Meteor T-7 trainer version
	1	DH-89 Dominie	Light transport ac	(1953)	1954	1	Second-hand
	40	Spitfire	Fighter aircraft	(1954)	1954	40	Ex-UK; Spitfire F-22 version; modernized before delivery
	9	Meteor	Fighter aircraft	(1955)	1956	9	Meteor F-8 version; incl 2 Meteor FR-9

							reconnaissance version

USA

	No.	Designation	Description				Comments
R: Israel	51	PT-17 Kaydet	Trainer aircraft	(1949)	1950-1951	51	Ex-US
	(11)	T-6 Texan	Trainer aircraft	(1949)	1950	(11)	Ex-US
	(5)	T-35 Buckaroo	Trainer aircraft	1951	1952	(5)	
	38	T-6 Texan	Trainer aircraft	1952	1952-1953	(38)	Second-hand
	(70)	PA-18/L-18/L-21	Light aircraft	(1953)	1953-1957	70	Second-hand
	2	PBY-5A Catalina	MP aircraft	1953	1953	2	Ex-US
	(40)	M-32	ARV	(1955)	1956-1959	(40)	Ex-US
	6	S-55/H-19 Chickasaw	Helicopter	(1956)	1957	(6)	
Syria	(6)	Beech-18/C-45	Light transport ac	(1950)	1950	(6)	
	(5)	T-6 Texan	Trainer aircraft	(1950)	1951	(5)	Ex-US
	6	Meteor NF-11	Fighter aircraft	(1954)	1954	6	Ex-UK; Meteor NF-13 version

USSR

	No.	Designation	Description				Comments
R: Syria	(100)	BTR-152	APC	(1954)	1956	(100)	
	(100)	BTR-40	APC	(1955)	1955	(100)	
	(200)	M-30 122mm	Towed gun	(1955)	1955-1957	(200)	Probably ex-Soviet; designation uncertain
	(25)	MiG-15/Fagot	Fighter aircraft	1955	1955-1956	(25)	From Czechoslovakian production line
	6	MiG-15UTI/Midget	Trainer aircraft	1955	1955-1956	(6)	Probably from Czechoslovakian production line
	(100)	T-34/85	Tank	(1955)	1956-1958	(100)	Ex-Soviet
	(20)	Yak-11/Moose	Trainer aircraft	(1955)	1955	(20)	Possibly from Czechoslovakian production line
	8	Il-14/Crate	Transport aircraft	(1956)	1957	8	
	7	Mi-1/Hare	Light helicopter	(1956)	1957	7	
	60	MiG-17/Fresco	Fighter aircraft	1956	1957	60	
	16	Project-123/P-4	FAC	(1956)	1957-1961	16	Ex-Soviet
	(150)	T-54	Tank	(1956)	1957-1958	(150)	
	(20)	Yak-18A/Max	Trainer aircraft	(1957)	1957	(20)	

Italy

	No.	Designation	Description				Comments
Syria	(20)	G-46	Trainer aircraft	(1949)	1950	(20)	
	(30)	G-55A	Fighter aircraft	1949	1950	(30)	G-59-2A version; incl 4 G-59-2B trainer version