CHAPTER II

Assad's Rise to Power
Hafiz al-Assad was born on 6 October 1930 in an Alawite family at Qardaha in the province of Latakia in Syria. From his humble origin he rode the crest of a meteoric rise to the zenith of power. He was one of the eleven children of Ali Sulayman, "one of the few literates (Afandi) in his village". After the completion of his primary education at the village school, Assad was sent to the secondary school at Latakia. This proved to be one of the most influential events in the life of young Assad.

It was in Latakia that Assad came in contact with the heady ideologies of Ba'athism, Communism, Arab nationalism and even Syrian nationalism of the brand preached by Antun Sa'adeh. Thinkers and activists like Michel Aflaq, Salah al-Din Bitar, Zaki al-Arsuzi and Akram al-Hawrani preached revolutionary doctrines and swept away the imagination of the people exposed to their ideas. Assad, too, was exposed to these revolutionary ideas and in the late 1940s he joined the Ba'ath party. The Ba'ath party was torn apart by schisms and it was al-Arsuzi's faction that Assad favoured. By the time Assad was seventeen, he became an active member of the Ba'ath party, writing leaflets, painting slogans on walls, holding clandestine meetings etc. In the last two years of school, Assad earned the reputation of a school-politician and was elected the head of his school's student affairs committee. This reputation touched new heights when, in 1951, he was elected president of the Syrian Students Union. His experience as a schoolboy politician was to have a vital impact on the formation of his character and political moulding in his later life.
When he was twenty years old, he left Latakia and joined the Homs Military Academy and then shifted to the flying school. He graduated in 1955 and was posted to the Mezzh air base near Damascus. Syria had fallen under the sway of the military soon after its independence. The numerous coups kept the country continually under military rule and as a result the military had penetrated the politics of the infant independent state and politics had infiltrated the uniformed ranks as well. Hence, it was only natural that Assad got involved in the country's politics while in the armed forces. The Ba'ath party especially had maximum of members, supporters and sympathisers in the armed forces. Assad could not keep himself away from the general current and he, too, undertook the task of spreading Ba'athist and nationalist ideology among his brother officers.

Assad was sent to Egypt in 1955 for further training. Egypt of that period was a hot-bed of resurgent Arab nationalism. The defeat in Palestine had sparked off a debate in the Arab World. Nationalist feelings were at a high pitch, especially under the charismatic leadership of Gamal Abdul Nasser. Nasser's anti-western and anti-imperialist words and acts caught the imagination of the Arab masses and Syria was not isolated from this new wave. In fact, Syria seemed to be affected the most and the eventual result was the merger of Syria and Egypt into one state, the United Arab Republic (U.A.R.) in February 1958. But this union was not fated to last long.

After a brief training stint in Soviet Union, Assad returned to a Syria seething with uneasiness and protest against the "colonialistic" attitude of Egypt. Assad was posted back to Cairo in 1959. There he came in contact with Syrian Ba'athists who
were dissatisfied with the way the Union was functioning. The fact which rankled them most was the "suicide" of their party, Ba'ath, which had dissolved itself at the insistence of Nasser and as a pre-condition to the union.

It was this resentment against the old guards of the party who had so willingly agreed to the dissolution that created a new faction comprising basically young officers (often called the neo-Ba'athists). Resentment against the veteran leaders and Nasser grew, and in 1960, a secret organisation which the members called "Military Committee" was formed. These young officers thought of themselves as the saviours of their country. This tendency of the armed forces to jump into politics to rescue their country was not new. The series of coups in Syria proved the prevalence of this tendency. It was the coup of the Free Officers in Egypt, which catapulted Nasser to the top, which confirmed the belief of the officers that they could save their respective states from political degeneration. Assad was one of the five officers who constituted this committee. This committee's aims were to reconstruct the broken Ba'ath party, to preserve the union, and to suppress the old order which was trying to recapture influential positions in Syria.

The aim of these "neo-Ba'athists" was not to break the union but to work within it to improve Syrian political and economic conditions. Among other aims, the major ones were to work within the political structure of the Ba'ath; not to abandon their Ba'athist colours and principles; to keep the Ba'ath ideology alive; and to enroll more, and preserve the existing Ba'ath members; and to defend the union. Accordingly, they beseeched Nasser to allow the prominent Ba'ath leaders to return to
Syria and set them up in pivotal positions. But Nasser entertained a kind of hostility towards the Ba'ath and so this plea fell on deaf ears.

Accordingly, some prominent members of the Military Committee went to Syria and propagated these views. Gradually, the network grew. (An interesting fact to be noted was that most of the members were from the various minority sects of Syria). They continued their efforts to strengthen the union from within. The union came to a hasty end on 28 September 1961 when a right wing *coup* led by Lieutenant Colonel Abd al-Karim Nahlawi succeeded in taking over power in Syria (This day is known as *Yaom al-Infisal* (The Secession Day). Thus the infisalyeen (Secessionists) succeeded in divorcing Syria from the union. When this event took place, most members of the Military Committee who were in Egypt, including Assad, were jailed in Egypt. After some weeks, these officers were repatriated to Syria. These officers now worked for overthrowing the secessionist regime by earnestly reviving their activities and increasing efforts at recruitment in the army. They even approached Nasser for another union, but on their terms. In 1962, Syria was racked again by *coup* and attempted *coup* which almost broke up the group. But on 8 March 1963, the neo-Ba'athists staged a successful *coup* and swept into power. The trio of Muhammed Umran, Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Assad emerged as the leaders in the new regime. Assad was the youngest and he had a vital unit, the Air Force, under his command. Later on, it was the airforce that formed the basis of his power. The government now was of Nasserite-Ba'athist combine. Assad and his friends from the armed forces made Colonel Amin al-Hafiz their front man and got involved in a
struggle with the Nasserites. Gradually, they purged the regime of the Nasserites and other factions and strengthened their hold over Syrian politics.

"The years immediately following the 1963 coup were Assad's apprenticeship for power. They were a tough, instructive interlude in which one rival after another fell, or was pushed, leaving him to breast the tape alone. In the course of time he made lasting friendships as well as permanent enmities. Without this training in survival his tenure at the top might not have been so prolonged nor have made such a mark." Thus, these years moulded Assad's political career. The tussle between the Ba'athists and the neo-Ba'athists came to a head in 1966 when yet another coup (Harakat Shubbat) brought the neo-Ba'athists to power. In the new regime, Assad was made the Defence Minister and the commander of the Air Force. This portfolio gave Assad his first seat in the Syrian cabinet.

These neo-Ba'athists introduced new ideas, reforms and programmes. They believed in the primary need to replace the old guards' reformist socialism with a radical social transformation to improve socio-economic conditions in Syria. Extensive programmes of nationalisation and land reforms were implemented. In foreign policy matters, it is suggested they placed less emphasis on pan-Arab unity, preferring to put all their focus on Syria. For instance, Syria-Soviet relations were improved, some believe at the cost of greater Arab interest. But the rule of the neo-Ba'athists was not smooth and instability and militancy intensified. The new

government was composed of various radical military and civilian factions. Internal conflict grew.

A number of factors were responsible for the instability of the new regime. The base of the new regime was extremely narrow. Unlike the previous Ba'athi regimes this one did not even have the bulk of Ba'athi support as the veteran leaders had been thrown out of the party. Secondly, the new regime was Alawi-dominated, which exacerbated the already prevailing polarisation between the Alawis, the Druzes and the Sunni Muslim urban population. The most dangerous development was the division within the ruling elite, specifically between Assad and Jadid.

The new regime took shelter in foreign policy in order to keep the internal dissensions at bay. They formulated a radical foreign policy, hoping that success on this front would make the population rally behind them. The regime showed strong nationalistic leanings and gave priority to an armed struggle against Israel. A policy of military and political cooperation and coordination with other Arab states, especially to meet Israel in armed conflict, was advocated. This regime proved to be one of the most extreme Syria has ever known. It was rash in its foreign policy and radical in its domestic policy. It took the country to war and tried to change the Syrian society drastically. Though Assad was more or less in congruence with the regime's policies, he differed from them because he preferred a cautious policy. He did not advocate drastic changes and thoughtless forays into foreign policies. The result was eruption of a power struggle between Assad and Jadid.
ASSAD-JADID RIVALRY:

In the years after 1966, the foreign policy of Syria was shaped to a considerable extent by the internal pressures working on the regime. The squabbles among the ruling elites had enormous impact on the formulation of foreign policy. The most prominent rivalry was the Assad-Jadid contest for supremacy. The first indication of this rivalry was when the Salim Hatum coup of September 1966 took place. Some maintain that the coup was unsuccessful basically because Assad withdrew support of the Air Force on which Hatum was banking, thus insinuating that Assad was a co-conspirator in the coup. Others maintain that Assad was not involved in the coup. In fact, it was the timely intervention of Assad which aborted the coup, when he sent air force jets to buzz Suwayda, where Salim Hatum was holding Jadid. Patrick Seale, in his book, Assad, The Struggle for the Middle East gives a detailed account of the second version.

The Hatum coup was suspected by many as being instigated and supported by Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Israel and imperialist western powers. The Syrian regime claimed that this internal-external conspiracy was designed to overthrow the neo-Ba'ath because of its uncompromising revolutionary stand against Arab reaction, Zionism and imperialism. The period preceding the coup had witnessed some loud declarations of apprehension regarding reactionary, imperialist and Zionist aggression against the regime.
Jadid tried to replace Assad loyalists and moved closer to the communists. Simultaneously, Assad began consolidation of his power. As Minister of Defence he was able to appoint many of his personal supporters to strategically important positions. The conflict between the two factions took a very serious turn after the defeat of 1967, mainly due to divergent opinion over military, foreign and socio-economic policies which were prevalent at that period. The officers blamed the civilians for precipitating the conflict while the civilians blamed the defeat on the officers' incompetence.

A wider point of dissension was about the choice of types of socialism and Arab nationalism which would accord with the Ba'ath principles and at the same time produce the best results. The Ba'ath Party Congresses became the forum where the divergent views began to be aired. The group led by Jadid demanded top priority to *tahwil Ishtiraki* (Socialist transformation) of Syria. They were against military alignments with the "radical" Arab states. The group led by Assad leaned strongly in favour of Arab nationalism and gave priority to an armed struggle against Israel. They put this above socialist transformation in Syria and were ready to join together with other Arab states in the fight against Israel.

It was right after the 1967 war that Assad earnestly began to consolidate his personal power base in the armed forces. He was convinced that it was due to Jadid and the government that the defeat came about. The appeal that Jadid's regime held for Assad ended.
There were numerous differences in Assad's perceptions and Jadid's policies. While Jadid's regime continued to give a free hand to Palestinian guerrillas, Assad felt that it was the guerrilla raids that had given Israel the excuse for the war and felt it would be in Syria's interest to gain control over the guerrillas.

There was no agreement on priorities. Assad felt that the first priority was to attain military parity with Israel while Jadid's regime focussed on bringing about an "internal revolution".

There were no similar answers to questions like where should the dwindling resources be spent, what kind of a party the Ba'ath should be, what ideologies were correct. While Assad recommended opening up of Ba'ath party to new members and alliances with political allies, Jadid's regime wanted that the party should close in on itself to keep the party militants safe from new opportunist members.

It grew apparent that the chasm between the two rivals was widening. Assad gradually began evicting Jadid's supporters from influential positions in the armed forces. Jadid strengthened his hold over the party apparatus. This led to a fissure between the military and the civilians leading to a duality of power following two different kinds of policies.

The crux came in 1970 when Syria's political leaders decided to intervene in Jordan in favour of the Palestinians' commando organisation. But this step resulted in a disastrous failure. The Assad faction did not support this but preferred a front of
Syria, Jordan and Iraq to be formed against Israel. The political leadership, headed by Jadid, blamed the Syrian army's poor performance on Assad, who in turn, accused the political leadership of having weakened the army through political purges, and having given preference to party interests over those of the nation.²

Assad's strength rested in the army but he had limited influence over the party. Jadid's influence was almost wholly within the party. He was not popular among the military officers due to his frequent purges.

The death of Gamal Abdal Nasser on 28 September 1970 created a vacuum in the Arab world. In the Arab world this vacuum was asking to be filled.

There were contenders all over, including in Syria. Meanwhile, the rivalry of the two factions intensified. On 30 October, an emergency National Congress was called. An acrimonious session followed for 12 days. While Assad ridiculed his radical critics, Jadid's followers charged Assad of being defeatist. The session reached a confused end on 12 November and, on 13 November 1970, Assad ordered his military to occupy the offices of the prominent civilian party leaders, including Salah Jadid and President Nur al-Din al-Atasi. Thus, political power was wrested by the officers' faction of Assad.

It was this al-Haraka al-Tashihiya (The Correctionist Movement) of 1970 which brought Assad into power. A national plebiscite in 1971 formally elected him

as President of Syria. This coup was noteworthy because power was seized without any bloodshed. Assad was the first Alawi to become President and thus ended the tradition of having a Sunni as the President of Syria. Since then, the civilian section of the Ba'ath has not been able to regain its old strong-hold over the party.

Assad's ascent to power in 1970 resulted in a number of changes in the internal environment of Syria. The most noteworthy was that he gave stability to the regime, an unprecedented factor in the history of Syria. Gradually, Assad consolidated his power bases. His first priority was to widen the base of support for the regime. While enumerating factors which helped in his ascent to power and continued regime, one must mention the role of his sect, the Alawis.

THE ALAWIS:

Traditionally, the Alawis were almost a society apart from the rest of Syria as they are considered to be a heterodox offshoot of Islam regarded as heretical by the majority, who initially found their refuge in the mountains. They are also called a "remnant of the Shi'i upsurge which had swept Islam a thousand years before: they were islands left by a tide which had receded". Their sectarian belief rests on the conviction that Ali was the rightful heir to Prophet Muhammad but was deprived of his right by the first three Caliphs. They have numerous other esoteric beliefs which include strains of animism. Due to this aspect, the Sunni Muslims grew hostile and some even refused to recognise the Alawis as Muslim. This led to their withdrawal.

\footnote{Seale, n.l., p.8.}
from the mainstream and they became secretive about their religious principles. They adopted the doctrine of *taqiya,* that resorts to a prudent duplicity which justified cloaking their true beliefs.

When they felt persecuted due to their beliefs and suspected heresies, they took refuge in the mountains and formed pockets of Alawis which flourished in the hazardous heights. The Alawis were also known as the Nusayris, after the name of its founder, Muhammed ibn Nusayr, of the ninth century. But, later they came to be commonly known as Alawis, i.e. followers of Ali. They consider themselves as a Shi'i sect and are regarded by some as an offshoot of *'Ethna Ashariah'* (Believers in twelve Imams), Shi'ism.

Sunni-Alawi hostility is not a new phenomenon. The Ottomans too tried to force the Nusaiyris to adopt orthodox Islam. It was only in the mandate period that the French, in keeping with the eternal colonial principle of *divide et impera,* drew the Alawis out of their mountains and constituted an "Autonomous Territory of the Alawis" in 1920, and renamed it "State of the Alawis" in 1922. It was also the French who started the active recruitment of Alawis into local forces (like the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*) along with other minority sect recruits.

Alawis faced a tough life in the mountains and were poverty stricken. The *'Jabal al-Alawiyin'* (Alawi Mountain) was formerly one of Syria's most destitute and least developed areas and in several respects lagged behind the rest of the country. "They were so poor that the poorest families indentured their daughters as house servants to the richer families, mostly urban Sunnis who usually regarded the Alawi

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peasants with contempt".\(^5\) As a result of these social and economic conditions, the Alawi youth willingly joined the armed forces.

The French started a trend which was later to play a decisive role in Syrian politics. They actively encouraged separatism of the Alawis but the scheme could not succeed in totality. For instance, one of the founders of the Ba'ath party, an ardent nationalist, was Zaki al-Arsuzi, an Alawi. Nevertheless, due to their role during French tutelage, Alawis were accused of being anti-nationalist by others, specially the Sunni Muslims. It was only later, when the Alawi group of army officers gained status in the military that the Alawi star began shining brighter. Those from poor background looked at a career in the military for social and economic advancement. Once they found themselves in senior ranks, they tried to recruit other members from their own sect.

The foundation of the Ba'ath party was also utilised as an opportunity to improve their lot by the Alawis. Secularism preached by the party appealed to the minorities as such a policy was believed to offer them an opportunity to participate in national political life on an equal basis. The Alawis further steadied their foothold in the party after Syria's secession from the union with Egypt in 1961. The Military Committee had Alawis in majority and they represented the most organised component of the post-1961 reconstitution of

the Ba'ath party. By 1963, the Alawis were comfortably entrenched in both the party and the military. They grew numerically stronger and a lot more influential in the officer corps after the Ba'athi transformation of the armed forces led by the Alawi triumvirate of Assad, Jadid and Muhammad Umran. The failure of the attempted coup of 18 July 1963 by Sunni officers resulted in the purging of many Sunni officers and this strengthened the Alawi hold. After the 1967 war, the intra-Alawi struggle between Jadid and Assad became more prominent. After the Correctionist Movement of 1970, the Alawis further consolidated their power. With a sizeable stake in the new status quo they had a natural incentive to support the leader who had helped realise it. "It was... the manner in which President Assad consolidated his personal position... through the interlocking and mutually reinforcing institutions of the presidency, the military and security services, and the Ba'ath party, that marked the final stage of the transition of the Alawis from an under privileged, socially and economically backward religious minority to a significant political force dominating the power élité of today". 6 This political ascendancy of the Alawis can be regarded as one of the strongest factors which has accorded unprecedented stability to President Assad's regime.

THE BA'ATH PARTY, MILITARY AND BUREAUCRACY:

Assad built his power around the triad of the Ba'ath party, the military and the governmental bureaucracy. By heading these three, he now stands at the apex of

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powers and has successfully retained his all-powerful position. He is the *Amin al-A'am* (General Secretary) of the party, the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and the President who heads the executive set-up.

Assad had joined the Ba'ath party when he was still at secondary school. The party has been his medium to power and he rules through the party. The party is a vital source of authority and it is its programme and ideology, incorporating the concepts of unity, freedom and socialism which is theoretically both the motivator and guide to his policies. It also confers legitimacy to his regime. Therefore, Assad has striven to preserve the power of the party. One of his first goals was to broaden the base of support for the party. "The party must reflect the masses or perish" and so it should "operate within broad ideals simply stated and easily understood by the public". The party's complex apparatus of cadres and committees had caused the mobilisation and channelisation of support for the regime. The clientele today includes the urban people, the rural folk, peasants, youths etc. The party has banked on socialising the youth to help promote its policies and lead demonstrations. By making certain socialistic norms flexible, Assad has been able to gain the support of landowners, merchants and businessmen.

He has safeguarded his supreme position in the party by regular consultations with the regional commands in matters of policy making. He has succeeded in carrying with him the approval of the party before embarking on major adventures, for

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instance, the intervention in Lebanon in 1976. Thus, Assad has managed to obtain the backing of his party till date.

The armed forces are accorded respect in Syria, especially after the people witnessed its numerous shows of power via the coups after independence. It is sometimes regarded as a "guarantor" of the state's sovereignty against external aggressors. Realising the importance of this power base, Assad increased the salary and benefits and thus the prestige of the military. The size grew and professionalisation and sophisticated weapons were introduced. Due to his military background, Assad is respected in the military circles and senior officers support him. Moreover, Assad reshuffled the positions in the forces. He appointed loyal Alawis to key positions and implemented purges to reduce the power of those opposed to him. By these steps he nipped in the bud all chances of coups against him. In a nutshell, Assad demonstrated respect for this profession and he regularly consults senior officers on state affairs and foreign policy issues. He helped the military regain its reputation as protector of Syria's sovereignty by adopting a hardline, unrelenting stance against Israel. The greatest accolade was the improved performance of the Syrian forces in the 1973 war. "Assad's special relationship with the armed forces whose military capability makes them the ultimate arbiter of power in Syria, inevitably impressed the party and put the President at a considerable advantage in his dealing with it"8 Thus, the support of the uniformed elite has resulted in Assad's gaining the respect of the party.

8 York, n. 6, p. 106.
Assad, after his ascendancy to power, turned to the executive set up next. A People's Council was established which was to gradually comprise representatives of all political groups. It had no legislative or executive powers. The National Progressive Front and a kind of a broad based cabinet was established. A new Constitution was promulgated in 1973 which gave the President increased powers. Thus, Assad firmly consolidated his power by winning over the party and the armed forces and by making himself the executive head.

DETERMINANTS AND CONSTRAINTS ON SYRIA'S FOREIGN POLICY:

It is an acknowledged fact that the foreign policy of a state is often moulded by its domestic conditions, by the values, ideological inclinations and perceptions of policy-makers, and by the existing global and regional environment. The national interest of a nation would shape what the government desires to do but the environment determines what it is allowed to do. The domestic system provides the framework within which the foreign policy is allowed to operate, either providing opportunities or imposing constraints. The existing state system determines the government's policies. Moreover, even if the government formulates a policy by itself, the success in its implementation banks on the domestic situation.

Seen in the Arab context, this linkage is very prominent. The Arab states betray a strong correlation between foreign policy and domestic legitimacy. This region is perpetually conflict ridden - the longstanding Arab-Israeli conflict, territorial and boundary disputes, sectarian and ethnic divisions, et al - are perennially present
and they exercise enormous constraints on foreign policy making. This region has two special currents which are not in evidence in other regions of the world - the extra territorial and universalist forces of Arabism and Islam. These two ideological currents often weaken people's identification with the state of which they are the citizens. Considerable segments often tend to cling on to these somewhat esoteric forces, transcending the state boundaries. The appeal of Arabism and Islam is stronger among the Arab masses and this is the reason why Arab leaders address their appeals to citizens of other Arab states also, thereby undermining the existing state-system.

The period after the various territorial units emerged as modern independent states during the first quarter of this century witnessed a fast-paced social evolution and systemic changing process. New social and political forces emerged and the value system underwent drastic changes. This transformation led to serious domestic political instability. Traditional elites were swept away and military coups and counter coups became the order of the day. This instability in the domestic domain distorted and constrained the conception and implementation of the foreign policy of these regimes who were more concerned with their own security and self-preservation. Sharp ideological cleavages emerged. The end result of all variables was that the internal instability seriously weakened the position of a number of key-states and their constant concern for political survival obliged most Arab governments to devote a lot of their attention and energy to staying in power. This made it difficult for them to engage in any sustained activity in support of foreign policy goals. 9

9 Paul C. Noble, "The Arab System: Opportunities, Constraints and Pressure" in Bahgat Karany and AEH

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Widespread domestic instability left its mark on the behaviour of the states. The insecure regimes grew rigid in their policies. These regimes often took refuge in ideological strains, the prime among all ideologies was, of course, Arab nationalism. But under the pretext of this very ideology, Arab states attempted to legitimize their interference or intervention in the internal situation of other Arab states. Ideological considerations began to colour the perceptions and sometimes even moulded the objectives of policy makers. Ideological issues brought out into open the question of legitimacy. Therefore, in order to gain or retain legitimacy, the regimes, at least rhetorically, pledged their dedication to certain ideologies, for instance, Arab nationalism.

The dawn of the 1970s saw the end of an era of acute instability in the Arab world and governments were now able to devote attention to foreign policy. Internal stability made the system less vulnerable to external interference and they could now abandon their defensive stance. It also allowed them more manoeuvrability in foreign policy matters. The change in domestic setting also led to a decline in the vitality of ideology as a result. The foreign policies of Arab states since the early 1970s became more pragmatic where national interest gained priority over ideological consideration. It seemed rather difficult for an Arab state to extricate itself from pan-Arab linkages because all these states share certain commonalities like language, history, geography etc. The Arabs have a sense of Arab identity which transcends individual nationalities. This has caused a heightened awareness of each other's foreign policies.

Moreover, political phenomena taking place in one Arab state cause reverberations in the rest and, therefore, the states are prone to watch each other closely. The sense of commonality also forces the Arab regimes to adhere to the core Arab issues like the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian issue and external intervention. Moreover, the idea of all Arabs forming one nation has often propelled the concept of Arab unity and the floating of numerous unity plans. This pressure for a merger tends to undermine the legitimacy of existing states. This sense of Arab oneness has also resulted in the exposure of a state's political system to external, albeit Arab, pressures and manipulations. This permeability of Arab state systems still continues. Thus, we see that domestic and foreign policies of Arab states are closely linked.

In Syria, we witness a strong linkage of domestic policy and foreign policy. In the period after independence, Syria could not implement a noteworthy foreign policy because of internal political turmoil. The various regimes were too busy setting their house in order which left them with almost no time for foreign policy. Moreover, insecurity at home caused them to adopt hardline, unrelenting foreign policies of narrow perspective, for instance, the extreme policies of the Jadid regime caused the isolation of Syria.

The domestic environment in Syria directly influences its foreign policy because of a number of factors. First, relations between the influential groups in domestic political scene is one of the determinants of foreign policy. Secondly, realising the importance of internal groups, external actors, in the exercise of their foreign policy, try to influence internal groups against the regime or against certain
policies. Thirdly, internal groups do enjoy a say in the Syrian policy towards core Arab issues. No regime can ignore the popular sentiments of Pan-Arabism, and, therefore, has to pay heed to issues like the Palestinian Question, even if only to keep the populace satisfied.

Syria, by its geographical placing, is at a strategic location, and, thus, external factors always tend to interfere in the country's internal affairs. It is well known that Syria is regarded as "the heart of Arabism." Since modern Arab nationalism first found expression here, Syria is said to hold the key to the struggle for local primacy. Other Arab states feel that if they can control, or enjoy a special friendship with her, they can isolate the other contending Arab power in the race for Arab leadership. For instance, in the decades after independence, both Iraq and Egypt manoeuvred groups within the Syrian internal political spectrum to maintain, change or point Syrian policy in the direction perceived by each of them as desirable. Thus, we see that Syria is perceived to have a vital geo-political status.

It is often said that many Syrians, especially the ardent proponents of Arab nationalism, feel that there is no ideological legitimisation of Syria's existence as a state separate from the rest of the Arabs. This feeling inevitably weakens what, in modern nationalistic parlance, is called state nationalism or in other words Syrian nationalism. The feeling that Syria is the center of Arabism leads to Syrian concern about issues affecting all Arabs and it thus diverts concern from internal issues. As

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Patrick Seale writes, "Syria historically felt that she had a pan-Arab mission to erase the existing national territorial frontiers between Arab states, since these were artificial structures created by the powers".11

In the Constitution of the ruling Ba'ath Party, Arab unity has been given top priority and the party posited Arab unity with Syria playing a central role, as the ideal solution to the problems of Syrian national identity and dissatisfaction with her territorial boundaries. Thus this "unity" gradually became the crux of internal and external Syrian conflict.

A major source of instability in Syria has been sectarian rivalries, for instance, the Sunni-Minority rivalry. Minorities like Alawis, Druzes, Ismailis have often clashed with the Sunni majority. External actors have tried to take full advantage of this fissure and have endeavoured to help minorities in their struggle against the ruling elites.

External factors have played an important role in the struggle among internal factions to come to power in Syria. Appealing to external states in order to change the balance of power between various internal elites was very common in the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, the People's Party banked on Iraq, the National Party was often helped by Egypt, later the Ba'ath enrolled the help of Nasser to combat the communists; and the Syrian Communist Party tried to forge a linkage between Syria

and the Soviet Union. Reliance on external power led to external interference in internal matters. Thus, domestic factors influenced external policies.

Coming to the actual dynamics of Syrian foreign policy, initially its mainstay was the struggle against imperialist and Zionist forces and it was mainly pan-Arab in character. This led to a revisionist orientation, especially under the radical regimes. For instance, the Ba'ath tried to make Syria the lynch-pin of a pan-Arab revolution. But the defeat of 1967 and its aftermath rendered retention of this revisionist orientation difficult.

Syrian foreign policy was plagued by numerous drawbacks. Syria was cut up into smaller pieces and this truncated form was not strong enough to take on the combined threat of Israel and its guarantor, the USA. To achieve a kind of status quo in the region, Syria moved closer to the Soviet Union in search of arms and security. It failed to mobilise all Arab states into a common front. The defeat of 1967 drove home the costs of messianic revisionism and the result was a more pragmatic and realistic foreign policy after 1970 under Assad. The gap between goals and achievements were narrowed. The other two constraints working on its radical foreign policy were the fact that Golan's occupation by Israel had rendered Syria strategically insecure and, secondly, its economic base was too thin to support foreign policy commitments.

Moreover, Syria came under extreme kind of external pressure and, as a result, instead of leading the other Arab states it was often placed at the mercy of pressure
and decisions of other centres of power. But Syria did not abandon its pan-Arab role. It continued to regard itself as "the conscience of the Arabs" and the main champion of the Arab cause. The feeling of common nationhood and a common enemy often brought Syria closer to the other Arab regimes. However, Syria-Arab relations have not been bereft of differences, for instance, Syria has always opposed traditional Arab regimes which had been under capitalist/Western influence.

Internationally, Syria has always regarded itself as a member of the anti-imperialist and Third World groups. Due to the compulsions of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Syria was comparatively closer to the erstwhile Eastern bloc and assumed a very vocal stand against American machinations in West Asia. The closeness with Soviet Union also helped Syria in acquiring a sophisticated armoury of weapons which has helped it to become a strong military power in the region. A detailed account of ramifications of Soviet-Syria relationship is given in the last chapter of the work.

ASSAD'S FOREIGN POLICY: BRIEF OVERVIEW

President Assad introduced a new orientation to Syrian foreign policy when he came to power. His policy was a contrast to that of his predecessors and it was a success. He proved to be a cautious realist whose moves were directed by pragmatic calculations and not by impulse. He himself describes his policy as "realistic" as opposed to the "theory" of his predecessors. While dwelling on ideological - political aspects, he gives priority to military-strategic aspects and this propensity has earned
him success. "To escape from the clutches of the radical alignment with regional and international forces and to avoid polarization between the left and the right, Syria adopted a moderate line after 1970. Instead of closing doors, it adopted an "open door" policy which would safeguard the national interest and integrity of Syria." Assad has pursued his goals through a number of inter-changeable alliances, regional and extra-regional. He "takes care to hit the adversary without knocking him out, for the roles could be reversed one day." Many allude to this strategy as the "traditional Middle Eastern game of opposing and cooperating at the same time." Assad has achieved success through his careful policy of manoeuvring daringly but taking minimal risks.

When it comes to negotiating, he exercises a staunch defence of principles yet manages to show flexibility. He does not readily concede his major principles, yet is quick to bargain if the gains are advantageous.

The war of 1967 is said to have left a deep imprint on the mind of Assad. His foreign policy was basically a reaction to the defeat and the collapse of the Ba'athist revolutionary-nationalist strategy implemented in the run-up to the war. The first noticeable change was a considerable toning down of Syria's vocal policy declarations and Assad focussed on the recovery of the Arab land taken by Israel in the 1967 war.

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12 Personal interview with Khalil Jawwad, Director, Ba'ath Publications, Damascus, 26 June 1996.


Along with the preservation of his regime, he accorded priority to improve the
defence capabilities of Syria. To make this possible, he launched new diplomatic and
strategic alliances. His diplomatic flexibility included acceptance of the principle of a
political settlement of the Arab-Israel conflict in return for Israeli relinquishment of
occupied Arab lands, efforts to whip up international backing for a settlement,
expansion of Syria's defence capabilities - not just for defence but also to gain
diplomatic leverage and to militarily take back the occupied lands if diplomatic
measures fail. To achieve these goals, he tried to establish closer ties with the USSR
and other Arab states. As Rafiq Juajati, ex-ambassador to the United States stated,
"we did not want to continue with the same quarrels which the previous regime had.
We followed the same policy of Arab unity, but amicably and not with a
confrontationist attitude."15 Basically, he tried to narrow the gaps between the policy
goals and achievements.

Margaret G. Hermann, while assessing the role of Assad as a leader, has
underlined three major foreign policy goals of Assad. They are: "recovery of the
territory in the Golan Heights occupied by Israel in 1967, guarantee of the rights of
the Palestinians, and a leadership role in the region".16 But a closer look reveals that
Assad's foreign policy goals have long since spilled over these parameters drawn by
Hermann.

16 Margaret G. Hermann, "Syria's al-Assad" in B.Kellerman and J.Z. Rubin, eds., Leadership and Negotiation in the
Early in his rule Assad achieved a series of impressive domestic successes - he stabilized his regime, brought about domestic stability and consolidated his personal leadership and he, thus, acquired an aura of success. These domestic successes served as a firm bedrock for his foreign policy which, in turn, enhanced his regime's prestige and increased its legitimacy.

Assad based his authority on the triad of the Ba'ath party, the bureaucracy, and the military. Foreign policy making in Syria in the recent past has been concentrated at the top of the Ba'ath's single party state. The all-powerful President dominates the state system. He consults and directs the heads of the party, the military, and the bureaucracy in policy making. Though the President overshadows all institutions, there exists a collegial process in policy making. A circle of key leaders of diverse military background such as leaders, defence experts, foreign policy specialists, etc. are consulted. For instance, Assad got the approval of all the above segments in the case of Golan disengagement and intervention in Lebanon. In the consultative process, the President's voice is obviously the domineering one which guides the decision makers and moulds and shapes the policy under discussion. Nevertheless, Assad seems to have proved that he is a relatively self-effacing leader who pays heed to consensus and the views of subordinates before embarking on a particular policy. This style of decision-making helps Assad in retaining the loyalty and support of his subordinates.

Under Assad the political system has grown to be a kind of "national security state" which has tied up the society to the exigencies of foreign policy. The prevalent
decision-making process does not allow institutionalised constraints. The State-controlled economic system allows the required spending on foreign policy goals. The single party system accords support to Presidential decisions.

Due to Assad's efforts, the military capacity of Syria has assumed greater order and dimensions. It has reached a stage where it can contemplate taking on Israel militarily. The military establishment has expanded, quality of officer corps improved, and professional and sophisticated weapons were acquired to make the forces more effective. Syria's performance in the 1973 war has brought out the drastic improvement, specially when compared with the performance in the 1967 war. The improvement in defence capabilities is also obvious.

In the sphere of political-diplomatic skills in exercise of foreign policy, too, a new sophistication is evident. Assad has brought Syria out of the isolation which had been caused by the extremities of the Jadid regime. He has ended the ideological squabbles with other Arab states and tried to forge a united front. He has also tried to garner international support to coerce Israeli withdrawal from Arab lands and to work for Palestinian statehood. Though he has displayed great diplomatic skills, he knows that diplomacy can never be a substitute for the use of military force. Therefore, he has adopted the two-pronged policy of diplomacy and increase of military potential.

Assad's foreign policy orientation is based on how he perceives Syria's role in major issues of regional and international concern. In the regional context, Syria has always regarded itself as the center of Arabism and, traditionally, Syrian national
identity focuses on the idea of a larger Arab nation, "from the Gulf to the Ocean", and regards the prevailing state-system as artificially imposed. Ba'athist doctrine, reflecting the dominant Syrian view, regards the regional individual state-system as a mutilation of the Arab nation. Overcoming this "mutilation" is the "eternal mission" of the Ba'ath. The Syrians see their country as the base and vanguard for this mission. As a result, Syria has been the firmest and the most consistent focal point of pan-Arab sentiments.

In contrast to the above it is often asserted by many that the Syrian regimes have failed in bridging the gap between their professed ideals and achievements and that Syria is not actually working for the betterment of the Arab cause but that a narrower raison d'etre has overshadowed the pan-Arab ideals. Syrians counter this allegation by stating with their usual cultivated elan in extricating themselves, "what is good for Syria is good for the Arab nation". Nevertheless, Syria has proved its commitment to the idea of one Arab nation; the union with Egypt was an actual crystallization of this ideal and since then Syria has been the originator of numerous "unity plans".

This Arab state has also earned the reputation of being the most "steadfast" of the Arab frontline states due to Assad's unrelenting stand against Israel. He has tried to turn the Ba'athist perception of Syria being "the vanguard" of the larger Arab nation into reality. Here, he met with hostility of other Arab states who were contenders for the privilege of leading all Arab states. Iraq has remained a perennial and common concern to all Syrian rulers. The Hashemites of Jordan had the dream of dominating a
state uniting Jordan and Syria. Coming to the question of leadership, Assad firmly believes in the centrality of Syria and so strives to actualise this belief.

In the global context, Assad put his country in the camp of those opposed to imperialism and colonialism. He never aligned totally with either Super Power, though relations with the Soviet Union were definitely closer. Otherwise, his attitude towards that state has been determined by its position on the issues of importance to the Arabs, mainly, the Palestinian cause. We know that the record of the Eastern bloc has been better towards the Palestinians, and hence Syria has inched closer to the socialist states and grown hostile towards the US due to the American tradition of helping Israel.

As regards Israel, Assad perceives it as the main enemy, the "imperialist linked colonial-settler state" implanted at the heart of historic Syria. Accordingly, after his ascent to power, his first priority was to make Syria militarily strong in order to wrest back the land lost by force, if required. Thus, it seemed that the Palestinian cause became subordinate. Syria, in the 1970s, agreed to try negotiations with Israel, but made it clear that core demands like total evacuation and Palestinian rights were not negotiable. This attitude lasted for a long time. For two decades, conditions of a settlements with Israel were purely hypothetical but the dawn of the 1990s saw a changed scenario when the ongoing peace process with Israel started.

Assad has striven to make Syria the main champion of the Palestinian cause. Syria has played an instrumental role in the formation of the Palestinian resistance
movement and it has been a major source of military and political support. Relationship with Palestinian groups has not been a stable one, as it has suffered a number of ups and downs. Assad strongly felt that the guerrilla actions need to be controlled since irregular fighting could drag the unprepared conventional armed forces of Arab states into a war with Israel, a war where Israel could gain an upper hand.

In the intra-Arab arena, Assad initially tried to enroll Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon into an eastern front against Israel but met with little success. His relations with Iraq seem to be jinxed. A renewed alliance with Egypt was a cornerstone of Assad's foreign policy in the early and mid-1970s till the Camp David Accords blew them apart. Assad has also endeavoured to forge strategic alliances with the petro-powers of the Gulf.

Thus, we see that Assad introduced a new orientation to the foreign policy. For instance, in the Ba'ath party Congress in 1971, he initiated a major scaling down of the objectives of foreign policy, "liberation of Palestine" was replaced in Syrian discourse by a rather ambiguous "Palestinian rights" and "liberation of Occupied Territories" was given priority. The war of 1973 shifted the balance of regional power in favour of Arabs and this helped Assad assume an important role in regional politics.

Under Assad, Syria's revolutionary nationalism slowly gave way to realpolitik and pragmatic approach to the West Asian political system. The reorientation of
foreign policy was obvious from the limited objectives of the 1973 war, ensuring Syrian success in the war and the successful pan-Arab solidarity. Assad attempted to do away with the policy of pan-Arab radicalism and replaced it with pan-Arab solidarity.

It is often said that Assad's foreign policy borders on being an impressionistic one - that it is subjective and unsystematic. Some assert that his policies are dogmatic and doctrinal, while others say that his approach is pragmatic. The following chapters will be an effort to unravel the source of his policies and test which of the above assertions are apt.

But those involved in the nuances of foreign policy making call the Syrian foreign policy a mixture of the right amount of idealism and realism. As Assad Kamil Illyias, a political advisor to the presidential office states, "sometimes idealism is necessary. But we have mixed it with realism. For example, idealistically we accorded priorities to plans of Arab unity but had to back out when realism dawned that such attempts were being fouled by external interventions."\(^17\)

\(^{17}\) Personal interview with Assad Kamil Elyas, (Political Advisor) Damascus, 3 June 1996.