CHAPTER IV

Assad’s Policy Towards the Palestinians
The intricate relationship between Arab regimes and Palestinian has been a continuous theme in Arab politics. The Palestine Question has been the key-formative variable in shaping the Arab world's political complexion over the last five decades. It has remained a central element in the rise and development of Arab Nationalism and Pan-Arabism. The Arab-Palestine relationship is given various kinds of interpretations. Some regard it as a moral and ideological commitment; others insist that it is pragmatic politics which compels Arab regimes to pay heed to Palestinian issues; the cynics maintain that the Palestine issue has been used as a weapon against Israel and against each other for political motives; there are those who are convinced that Palestine has remained a legitimizing card for Arab regimes. These divergent views will inevitably persist because the Arab-Palestinian relationship is not one-dimensional but multi-dimensional and it operates on various levels. There is also a difference in each Arab state's attitude towards the issue which changes according to circumstances.

At times when the intra-Arab rivalries intensified, the Palestinians' cause was dragged out of the closet and championed in loud tones. Each Arab state would project itself as the protector of the cause because of its appeal to the common Arabs. Each would use the cause in matters where any gains were evident. Arab leaders tried to control or even dominate the PLO or other Palestinian groupings to enhance their own position with other Arab states. Some regimes even made it the bedrock of their legitimacy. This tendency prevailed all over the Arab world and Syria was no exception to this phenomenon.
In keeping with this attitude, Syria regarded the former parts of Bilad al-Sham (Natural Syria or Greater Syria) as integral parts of the Arab nation, of which it regarded itself as a spokesman and which should remain in Syria's sphere of interest and influence. Syria regarded Palestine as its lost part and did not recognize the legitimacy of Israel. "It views Palestinians as southern cousins, little different from Syrians and sees itself as the major patron of the Palestinian resistance, having played primary role in its formation and carried the heaviest burden - among the Arab states, in defence of the Palestinian cause. This cause, Syria insists, is not exclusively Palestinian, but is an Arab cause for which Syria has special responsibilities unequalled by those of other Arab states".  

Syria has always seen itself as a chief antagonist against Israel. Specially after the 1967 war and the resulting loss of territories, Syria's primary foreign policy objective has been to recover the lost Arab lands. Syria also believed that Israel can be brought to book if the Arab states struck together, avoiding separate deals that settled for less than a complete return of Israel to the pre-1967 lines. Therefore, Syria concentrated efforts on the maintenance of Arab solidarity. The deal Egypt struck with Israel took the former out of the Arab group and Damascus was forced to seek to build alternative alliances. It needed to earn staunch partners to counter such deals. It was in this context that Syria turned towards the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the official spokesman of Palestinians. "The construction of a bloc in the Arab East encompassing Syria's immediate neighbours who shared either a border with Israel (Lebanon and Jordan), or Syria's stake in rolling back the Israeli occupation

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1 Hinnebusch n.4, p.2.
(Jordan and the PLO) was the most natural and immediately realizable alternative to the Egyptian alliance. In these states Syria faced special threats and perceived special opportunities connected to its struggle with Israel. The fact that they were "fallen away" parts of historic Syria made their incorporation into a Damascus-led alliance all the more appropriate". Since Syria was the senior state in this context and because it carried a bigger military burden of the Arab front, it sought to assume a senior role over the rest.

Before going into the details of Syria's relations with the PLO or Palestinians in the 20 years' period of 1970-1990, it would be enlightening to dwell upon the status of Palestinians in Syrian eyes. A combination of political, socio-economic and cultural factors had long been at work in Syria shaping popular opinion about Palestine.

The influx of Palestinians into Arab states started right after the war of 1948. While the refugees which poured into The Lebanon upset its delicate sectarian balance, it did not have any such effect in Syria. The initial influx of Palestinians into Syria was around 100,000, a substantial number no doubt. Subsequently, the government, through a series of laws, gradually paved the way for their integration into the local socio-economic system while preserving their separate Palestine identity. At this time Syria was suffering neither from unemployment nor limited natural resources unlike Lebanon and Transjordan. Therefore, the arrival of refugees in hordes did not actually threaten the economy or social structure of the country.

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2 Ibid.
Palestinians in Syria have never constituted more than 2/3 per cent of the population. This was the reason for difference in Syria's policy towards Palestinians, setting it apart from other Arab states' policy towards Palestinians.

Since 1948 the Palestinian community in Syria has risen to treble the initial number. In 1987, it reached an estimated 270,000 though most were registered as refugees with the United Nations Relief & Works Agency (UNRWA).

The policy of Syria towards these Palestinians has been a complex blend of separateness and integration. There are both internal and external political reasons for this. Since 1949, the Syrian government used directives which almost placed Palestinians on equal footing with Syrian nationals. For instance, Law No.260 of 1956 stated that "Palestinians residing in Syria as of the date of the publication of this Law are to be considered as originally Syrian in all things covered by the Law and legally valid regulations connected with the right to employment, commerce and national service, while preserving their original nationality". The last part of the sentence is the clear indication that Palestinians should remain Palestinians. Thus, the Palestinians had not been given citizenship though they are eligible for military service. The Wathiqat al-Safar (laissez-passes) which they are given for travel can also be used to restrict movement.

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Nevertheless, the Palestinians are better integrated in the Syrian way of life economically and socially than in any other Arab host country. Palestinians have equal access to education in government schools, universities and they could work without a work permit and on an equal basis with Syrians in most spheres of life, even government service. In the social sphere the two communities are closely linked by kinship and commercial ties and intermarriages.

The end of the 1960s brought about a new awareness - that this Palestinian community is an important potential threat to Syrian stability. The steady growth of the Palestinian nationalist movement after 1968 aggravated this apprehension.

This threat in the political sphere was perceived in different aspects. There was the possibility of a temporary coalition between the Palestinians and elements opposed to the Ba'ath like the Muslim Brotherhood. Whenever the Palestinians felt that an official Syrian policy was detrimental to their interests, they could combine with dissenting elements in the domestic arena and stir up trouble. The ruling clique was well aware that a volatile Palestinian minority could take to violence against Syrian officials or establishments or have a catalytic effect on the predominantly Sunni opposition.

With the rise in Palestinian commando activities, Syria felt the danger of Israeli retaliation on Syrian targets. The use of Syrian territory as a launching ground would inevitably risk Israeli retaliation and Syria could be dragged into a war unprepared.
Moreover, the specter in Jordan was an ominous sign. The catastrophic experience of King Hussein's tussle with the Palestinian commandos was noted. To avoid a similar experience, Assad set about formulating a meticulously balanced policy towards the Palestinians. This was a patent example of the contradiction between Assad's posture of professed pan-Arabism and a policy of Syrian nationalism. While attempting to keep his reputation as a champion of the Palestinian cause intact he tried to reduce the likelihood of Palestinians in Syria stirring up such trouble. Irrespective of such apprehensions the Palestinians in Syria could never pit themselves against the government because they and their organizations had a formidable stake in the preservation of good relations with the Syrian regime.

The PLO too was never in a position to alienate Syria because pragmatic political considerations impelled it to maintain a good workable relationship. Moreover, the PLO did not have much of a choice. Syria has remained a state which supported them, provided them an operational base, and helped channel the Soviet arms which were for the commandos in the Lebanon. Since such support was crucial, the PLO tried to limit its disagreements about the degree of PLO subordination to Syria to a low key level and never allowed it to escalate into overt confrontation.

Thus the Syria-Palestinian/PLO relationship has been one of mutual understanding and mutual dependence. Control of PLO policy has been important to Syria. PLO military activity against Israel or the Maronites could draw Israel into the Lebanon and thus embroil Syria into a war it was not prepared for. But such activities, if undertaken in suitable timing, could help Syrian strategy by showing
Israel and the US the cost of failure to reach a comprehensive peace acceptable to Arabs. Like other Arab states, Syria too tried to enhance its diplomatic leverage and prestige by playing the Palestinian card right. By exercising a say in Palestinian affairs, it could veto any settlement of the Palestinian issue which would leave Syria out in the cold. By having such a control it hoped to contain the Israeli military threat to its vulnerable western front.

Syria has attempted in the past to include the Palestinian movement in its ideological strain. The Ba'ath party tried to channelize Palestinian political energies in Syria by creating a Palestinian commando unit: *Tala'i Harb al-Tahrir al-Sha'biyyah or Saiqah* (Vanguards of the Popular War of Liberation). After the 1966 *coup*, the regime in power called for a "people's war" to liberate Palestine. The formation of the *Saiqah* was a step towards accomplishing this aim. With Syrian support in the form of money and arms, *Saiqah* by 1970 had developed into a well-equipped force that totalled more than 5000 men. Within the resistance movement, it tended to side with Arafat's *Fatah*. *Saiqah* promptly got embroiled in the internal power struggle in Syria on the side of Salah Jadid against Assad. As a result when Assad came to power, he purged *Saiqah* of its veteran leaders, reduced its numbers and brought it more under army control. 1976 witnessed an exodus of *Saiqah* members to other Palestinian organizations. *Saiqah*, however, gradually leaned more and more towards the Syrian point of view. "What status *Saiqah* maintains derives largely from the power of the Syrian regime and *Saiqah* is able to attract members
because of the importance of belonging to the party. Its power does not lie in strong ideological commitment or support from the Palestinian community at large.4

In retrospect, one can safely say that Palestinians have lived in Syria in "relative ease". They have been able to rise to prominence in the army, the Ba'ath party and in labour unions. They have never been exposed to massive military assaults from either the government or the Israelis.

Syrian-Palestinian relations ran a steady course till 1976 when crisis erupted in the Lebanon. Since 1948, Syria was regarded by the Palestinians as their most reliable supporter against Israel. The Syrian body politic retained a strong affinity for the Palestinians. Ba'ath party members and other important elements of the political and military sphere remained implacably hostile to Israel. Syria was a radical state demanding a comprehensive solution that included an independent Palestine and this gave the PLO an important leverage in diplomacy.

During the period leading up to the coup of 1966, the Ba'ath perceived that Syria cannot on its own execute a plan for the liberation of Palestine. So it called for a combined Arab effort but decried Nasser's "summit policy" and advocated an "offensive strategy in which the timing of the liberation and its form will be defined". It underlined that the aim should be "the liberation of Palestine from Zionism, the elimination of Israel, and the return of the Arab Palestinians to their country and their

homeland”. Syria asked for the founding of an Arab deterrent force and that the Palestine problem should be regarded as an Arab problem.

The policy of Syria in 1960s was accused of ambivalence since the official policy differed from the Ba'ath attitude. The official policy was to call the PLO "non-revolutionary" and "an organization for representation and not for liberation". Syria tried to cultivate and control Fatah through ties with its "moderate" leaders and infiltration of Syrian supporters. Fatah, in turn, received material, military and political aid from the ruling regime. Fatah ran two training bases in Syria and received help through transfer of arms.

A young group of left wing officers came to power in February 1966 and the Syrian strategy was now based on the slogan of "the popular liberation war as the sole way of liberating Filastin". Armed struggle was given precedence and Fidai activities were on the rise with active Syrian aid. Just before the war of 1967 Syria recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The result of this new approach was the Joint Struggle Agreement between Syria and Ahmad Shuqayri, the than chief of the PLO, which involved subversive activities in Jordan. As Fatah grew closer to Syria, the latter acquired more control over the former.

1970-1990: The post-1967 period saw acute domestic struggles in Syria. The Ba'ath tried to extricate itself from a deadlocked policy and domestic struggles and tried to

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6 Ibid, p.66.
strengthen its position in the Arab world. The result was the abortive military invasion of Jordan in September 1970. This failure led to the fall of the Jadid regime. On his accession to power, Assad's policy hinged on two aspects: an attempt was made to appear sensitive to the desires of Syrians on the Palestinian issue, and opportunities were capitalized upon to use the Palestinians as a source of external and internal legitimacy. The regime championed the cause to add to its appeal among the predominantly Sunni population and among the armed forces who favoured a rigid and uncompromising stand against Israel. Solidarity with the Palestinians and control over the PLO gave Syria an added leverage in the Islamic and Arab worlds.

Assad narrowed the gap between declared aims and achievements. He achieved this by exercising tactical flexibility in the conflict in internal and Arab politics. His secret of success in the Palestinian issue was due to his ability to strike a balance between pan-Arab nationalism and Syrian patriotism. He himself described his regime as a "rectification movement" (tashih) and he tried to rectify all the maladies that had set in in the Ba'ath and the state.

Unlike the preceding regime, Assad agreed with Nasser's concept of stages. The distinction between the stage of "liberation of the occupied territories" and that of the "liberation of Palestine" gave Syria a bit of space and it opened a door for a settlement in stages, provided it did not go against the strategic goal. Assad felt that though Israeli withdrawal from Sinai and Golan would settle the return of occupied territories, the real problem of the Palestinian people would remain. Thus he pledged to fight alongside the Palestinians even if/after the occupied lands are returned.
To achieve this a new approach was introduced. The principles were not armed struggle with political action as a supportive factor, little faith in passive political activities, and an emphasis on Arab unity. His pan-Arab policy called for overcoming of all differences of opinion between the Arab states since confrontation with the enemy called for broad action.

Assad's approach to the Palestinian problem was elaborate and systematic. Palestine was regarded as a part of the "Syrian Region" and hence liberation of Palestine was integral to the liberation of Syria. The Palestine problem, in his own words was, "not an issue for the Palestinians alone, it is an Arab problem, and first and foremost a Syrian problem". He also stressed that military victory and not political negotiations was the desired means to reach this goal.

Assad was more inclined towards the establishment of an eastern front and, therefore, he stressed the need for cooperation between Jordan and the PLO. He had to balance relations with Jordan and the PLO. He believed that Jordan must not be pushed towards an agreement with Israel, and so hostility towards it must cease. At the same time its activities towards the Fedayeen must end. Though Syria did not exert military pressure on Jordan their relations fluctuated due to the Palestinian factor being inter-woven in it.

Syria kept up its efforts of influencing the resistance movement through the Saiqah. However, it expressed satisfaction that the structure of the PLO met the needs of the Palestinian issue and of representation. But Syria continued to oppose the idea
of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza in the context of a political solution with Israel.

Syria's task of dealing with the Palestinians was made easy because the attitude of the Palestinian organizations towards the politics of the host country was not monolithic. Differences existed over ideology, tactics and actions. Fatah stressed that the PLO's credibility rested on maintaining good working relations with host countries with adherence to the principle of non-interference in the latter's internal matters. While Fatah attached more importance to political expediency, most groups were ruled by ideological considerations and protested against reactionary regimes. Moreover, since Syria claimed the credentials of an ardent Arab nationalist state, they could not find many faults with its attitude.

This easy state of affairs did not last for long. It could not remain immune from regional developments. The aggravation of the dangers to Syrian national security, the developments in the Lebanon, the Palestinian activities, and the Syrian response to all these exposed the intricacies of Syrian-Palestinian relationship, and brought the contradictions out in the open. When the Palestinian Fedayeen launched attacks on Israel from Lebanese territories, Syria was exposed to Israeli retaliations and was thus forced to try to contain such activities. Israelis targeted Syrian villages and the commando camps.

To curb this danger of Israeli retaliation, Syria tried to restrict commando activities from its territory and, instead, diverted them to be launched from Jordanian
and Lebanese territories. Palestinian raids in February 1969, from January to June 1970, January to March 1972 and in September 1973 led to sharp Israeli retribution. This speeded up the process of curbing these raids and by 1973 Syria-Israel Disengagement Agreement gave rise to Palestinian suspicion that Syria had reached a tacit understanding with Israel about total curtailment of Fedayeen activities from its territory. Syria was compelled by domestic reasons to resort to such curtailment. Lessening the number of Fedayeen in Syria would lessen their impact on domestic politics. Added to these reasons was the pressure from certain quarters in the armed forces who were opposed to Palestinian freedom of action in Syria. Moreover, in his preparation for the war of 1973, Assad felt that it would be more useful to have Jordan rather than the commandos on the Arab side. Thus he gave preference to not alienating Jordan over the commando issue.

Despite all these the PLO had little to complain about Syria since they realized that its basic goodwill towards their cause was vital. Syrian-backed forces provided crucial support to the commandos in Lebanon. That is why the Syrian limited constraints were not contested.

It was in 1976 that the cleavage emerged out in the open. Lebanon had become an inferno due to its civil strife and Syria had to control the fire before it could engulf its own land. The main protagonists in Lebanon at that time were the Maronites and the Sunni Muslims who were actively backed by the Palestinians. Assad strived to prevent the partition of Lebanon which would have a catastrophic effect on Syria. Nor did he desire that it should fall into the hands of those who would
soon turn it into a confrontation state in the conflict with Israel. The Palestinian activities from Lebanese soil gave Israel the chance to retaliate militarily. While Syria wanted this to be reduced, the PLO wanted to increase such activities.

Syria was soon thereafter officially invited by the Lebanese government to fight on the side of the Maronites against the Palestinians and the Muslim militia. This was an unprecedented and unexpected development and with this the Syrian-Palestinian relationship dipped to an all-time low.

The PLO, other Arab states and even certain sections of Syria's Sunni population who were exposed to incitement by Palestinians, opposed the Syrian action vehemently. The last tendency had to be curtailed to save the Syrian internal system from chaos. The Palestinians did not sit tight but made their disapproval apparent by embarking on a spree of violence and killings in 1976. For instance, four hostages were killed in Damascus in September, Syrian embassies in Rome and Islamabad were attacked and an attempt to assassinate Abdul Halim Khaddam, the main architect of Syria's Lebanese policy, was made in December. All these acts were suspected to have been carried out by the Palestinians led by the Abu Nidal group and Iraq was blamed of sponsoring such acts. In retaliation, Syria tried to prevent such acts by arresting Palestinians as a precautionary measure and placing many leaders under surveillance.

Assad tried to convince the Palestinians that the action in Lebanon was for the good of the latter since Assad's policy was to prepare to take on the Israelis militarily
if necessary, but only when all preparations are complete. Assad could rightfully claim that no Arab leader had fought more consistently and none had risked his political future like he did for the cause. Syria had armed the guerrillas in the 1960s, protected them from Jordan in 1970, had supplied the fighters when they took over the hill of Arqub, since 1972 Syrian anti-aircraft gunners had protected their camps from Israeli raids, in 1973, it had sent commandos to fight alongside the Palestinians in Lebanon. And Assad claimed that he was doing the right thing in Lebanon.

The war in Lebanon brought into focus the basic irreconcilability of the interests of the Arab states and the guerrillas. The latter desperately wanted freedom to decide their strategies but such an independence could be procured at the expense of the security of the Arab states. Assad had to take on the Palestinians in Lebanon because he realized that they "held the key to Lebanon's sovereignty; the power of decision over peace and war. This was the crux of the conflict with them." 7

Assad's war on Palestinians in defence of Maronites was seen as a reversal of alliances. "The lion of Arabism was slaughtering Arabism's holy cow". 8 He was charged of betraying the cause, of acting in tandem with the Americans and of playing minority politics-of rushing to the defence of Maronites, a minority, since he himself belonged to a minority sect.

Finally, in late 1976, Syrian presence in Lebanon was legitimized as part of the Arab Deterrent Force funded mainly by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. But despite all these, the slur incurred over this episode remained with Assad. He, on the other hand, remained convinced that his intervention was tactically and morally correct and that he was impelled by the highest principles.9

By the dawn of the eighties, Syria and the PLO had drifted apart. Syria still blamed the latter of playing havoc in Lebanon and accused the Palestinians of helping the Muslim Brotherhood in forming operational cells which posed a threat to the political system. The PLO was also accused of training and arming the Muslim Brotherhood and of supporting pro-Iraqi groups in Tripoli against local pro-Syrian groups and the Alawite community.

The list of PLO grouses against Syria was not shorter. It accused Syria of passivity in the face of Israeli attacks on Palestinian targets in South Lebanon and it charged that Soviet arms meant for them were confiscated by Syria. But the PLO could not break with Syria because the Syria-Israeli stand-off was vital for its survival. The quid pro quo was the acceptance of Syrian dominance.

In 1982, this delicately balanced state was derailed and then things changed beyond redemption. Israel attacked the PLO commandos and their infrastructure in Lebanon and Syria was called upon to prove its rhetorical commitment to the Palestinians. Syria had to tread carefully. If it joined hastily and was defeated, the

9 Interview with Assad, Damascus, 4 March 1977. Quoted in Seale, ibid.
regime could fall and if it did not, it would lose its credentials of being a champion of the Palestinian cause. Moreover, Israel gave repeated assurances to Syria that it will not go to war against Syria but would restrict itself only to the Palestinians. As usual this proved to be yet another Israeli deception and Syrian targets were attacked soon after. Assad had to protect Syria from two dangers: to avoid being ensnared into a war which would mean a Syrian defeat; and to avoid being evicted from Lebanon.

Syria reached a ceasefire with Israel after 6 days of fighting. The reasons which prompted this were many. Syrian army could not have stopped a total Israeli advance. The regime had to minimize military losses, since this would lead to internal turmoil. The tension that existed between Syria and Jordan and the hostility of Iraq made it feel strangely isolated and alone in facing the enemy. The Soviets refused to commit to give any protection to Syria. To top it all, there was a considerable loss of tanks, aircraft and missile batteries. It was realized that a defeat would mean a loss of face, military losses, losing the strategic parity and may be the loss of Bekaa Valley.

With this ceasefire, the PLO was left in the lurch and had to fight it out alone. On 21 July, Arafat appealed to Assad to intervene and ease the siege of Beirut but the latter could not. The PLO was defeated and evacuated from Beirut. Their bases in South Lebanon were smashed. These events reduced the PLO dependence on Syria and lessened Syrian control over the PLO, more so after the PLO headquarters were shifted to Tunis.
Syria was further antagonized when Arafat confabulated with King Hussein of Jordan on a peace plan with Israel based on the terms of the Reagan Peace Plan of September 1982. A peace plan on these lines could leave Syria out in the cold and the question of Golan Heights would remain unsettled. Therefore, Assad tried to contain the rising ascendancy of Arafat. Subsequently, Syrian involvement was suspected in the revolt within the Fatah against Arafat in May 1983. By December, the Fatah loyalists were defeated which ultimately resulted in their flight from Lebanon.

Assad continued to make efforts to undermine Arafat's leadership because there was the need to have a compliant PLO. He had to protect his regime of discredit over the Palestinian issue and to maintain the reputation of being the chief supporter of the Palestinians. His main problem was to portray the pro-Syrian Palestinian elements as a viable alternative to Arafat's leadership. Moreover, he had to prevent a Palestinian-Jordanian solution. The Syrian media attacked Arafat and called him an "Amiel" (collaborator). Relations reached a level where Arafat was declared a persona non grata in Syria. This step was justified as "Arafat was acting to harm the cause of the Palestinians and the integrity of Lebanon which ultimately will harm the Palestinians, the Lebanese, the Syrians and the ummah as a whole and no one would benefit from Arafat's policy but Israel".  

Arafat's new trend in diplomacy resulted in the signing of an agreement with Jordan in February 1985 which called for a joint approach to peace and the PLO agreed to participate in peace talks "within a joint delegation of Jordanian and

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Palestinian representation" and to form a "confederation Arab state of Jordan and Palestine". Syria vehemently opposed this and accused both Arafat and King Hussein of "playing the role dictated on them by the enemies of the Arabs". Syria made efforts to block the accord and "made the foiling of the accord its official policy".

This accord was born and faced its demise in Amman. King Hussein himself denounced the accord since it was a precondition laid down by Syria before normalizing relations with Jordan.

Syria was accused of continuing a vendetta against Arafat by backing the Amal militia in its drive against PLO in the "war of the camps" in Lebanon. In 1990, the PLO and other Palestinian organisations backed Iraq after it invaded Kuwait and this further deteriorated Syrian-Palestinian relations.

The ensuing years witnessed a struggle to have more influence over the Palestinian organizations, specially at the cost of Arafat. Syria, like every other Arab state, has been accused of playing the Palestinian card for political motives. But what sets it apart from the rest of them is the genuine concern it feels for the cause and the sacrifices it made for the Palestinians.

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