Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity

David Wallsh

This paper explores Syrian alliance formation strategy since the end of the Cold War. While previous research has sufficiently covered the alliance-making strategies of Syria and other Middle East states during the Cold War, surprisingly little work has been done to address the changes that have occurred in the past two decades. Chief among these changes was the fall of the Soviet Union and the transition to a unipolar balance of power marked by American primacy. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following question: how does the change in structure of the international system from bipolarity to unipolarity affect Syrian alliance formation strategy?

The answer to this question has important implications for international relations theory and U.S. foreign policy. From a theoretical perspective, few studies have examined the effects of unipolarity on international alliance-making. Of what exists, the majority focuses on America—the unipole—at the expense of relationships among medium powers themselves. Yet recent events have demonstrated that relations between medium power states like Turkey and Israel, Syria and Iran, and Qatar and Saudi Arabia are extremely important even for external great powers. This study will offer insights into second-tier power behavior by focusing on Syria's relations with a number of regional peers.

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From a policy perspective, this research will inform readers about a country that has long perplexed analysts despite only dominating international headlines for the past two years. For decades, Western policymakers have debated how to bring about Damascus's "strategic realignment" away from Iran and organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah.[1] Henry Kissinger once said that the Arabs cannot make war in the Middle East without Egypt, and they cannot make peace without Syria.

Understanding Syria's tendencies in the recent past will pave the way for clearer expectations about the future. No matter which individual or type of government emerges from the present chaos, the post-Arab Spring Syria will inhabit a unipolar global balance of power that provides constraints and opportunities similar to those of the past twenty years. What is more, the Syria of the future will inevitably share some of the interests, relationships, and institutional legacies of its former self. By examining Damascus's decision-making over the past two decades, this paper offers a template for explaining how states in general, and Syria in particular, will behave under certain conditions moving forward.

The following study argues that the change in the structure of the international system from bipolarity to unipolarity did in fact alter Syria's alliance formation strategy. It finds that while one strategy, balancing against threats, dominated strategic decision-making during the Cold War, a diverse and nuanced assortment of strategies characterizes the post-Cold War era. These strategies remain a function of threats, but vary inasmuch as those threats—and newfound opportunities—fluctuate more frequently in a less stable unipolar world.[2]

Specifically, when the United States projects its power offensively and in a threatening manner, Syria will, as expected, join forces with others to balance against the United States. But when the United States restrains its use of force, the Syrian response varies. The default approach seems to be neither balancing nor bandwagoning, but rather forging closer ties with other regional actors in order to achieve maximum diplomatic flexibility by avoiding both dependence on and confrontation with the world's greatest superpower. At certain junctures in time, however, Syria has turned toward the United States either to secure offensive gains in the regional theater or to check domestic rivals at home.

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The first section of this paper offers an overview of the relevant literature concerning alliance formation and unipolarity. The second section provides a brief summary of Syrian alliance behavior during the Cold War. The third section presents five case studies of Syrian alignment in the unipolar era, including Syria's longstanding alliance with Iran, two instances of alignment with the United States, and Damascus's more recent pre-Arab Spring efforts at rapprochement with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, respectively. The final section summarizes this study's findings and offers a set of general policy recommendations regarding the future of U.S.-Syrian relations.

THEORIES OF ALLIANCES AND UNIPOLARITY

Scholars disagree on the impact of unipolarity in alliance-making. Some contend that an unrestrained superpower will prompt minor powers to unite in a classic balancing effort, while others maintain that alignment with the United States will prevail.[3] Proponents of this latter group can be loosely divided into three camps. The first camp argues that the United States is so powerful that other states that feel threatened stand no real chance of challenging it and, lacking defensive alternatives, will bandwagon with Washington.[4] The second camp offers a version of what has previously been described as both "omnibalancing" and regional balancing, suggesting that medium powers will in fact align with dominant external powers, not to bandwagon, but rather to balance against more acute threats closer to home.[5] Finally, the third camp holds that states may choose to bandwagon with Washington, not as a form of defensive appeasement, but in order to secure otherwise unattainable offensive gains.[6]

Stephen Walt compiles these and other strategies in what is the most comprehensive survey of alliance formation in unipolarity to date. In addition to the strategies mentioned above, he reviews the equally important concepts of soft balancing and leash-slipping. Soft balancing can be described as an effort directed against the specific policies of a dominant power rather than against the power itself. In Walt's words, "soft balancing is the conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to U.S. preferences—outcomes that could not be gained if the balancers did not give each other some degree of mutual support."[7] Meanwhile, leash-slipping refers to instances where states align with other medium powers as a way to reduce their dependence on a dominant power rather than to balance against it. This move provides partners the ability to maintain a degree of autonomy and flexibility in a unipolar world.[8]

In sum, this paper will look at Syrian alliance patterns in the unipolar era with an eye toward the extent to which Damascus's behavior conforms to the range of strategies mentioned above, including classic hard balancing, soft balancing, leash-slipping, bandwagoning, and regional balancing.

SYRIAN COLD WAR ALLIANCE STRATEGY

In order to develop the background against which to compare Syria's alliances in unipolarity, it is first necessary to review Syria's pattern of alliance behavior under bipolarity. For this we turn once again to Walt, whose *Origins of Alliances* provides us with the foundation for balance of threat theory. Walt offers a survey of the diplomatic history of the Middle East during much of the Cold War and comments on each of Syria's alliances between 1955 and 1979—summarized in Table 1.

Of Syria's eleven decisions to enter into an alliance between 1955 and 1979, ten were intended to balance against some external threat. These threats were most commonly from an inter-Arab rival but also came from Israel, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The only exception is Syria's bandwagoning alliance with Egypt and Iraq through the Tripartite Unity Pact in 1963, which crumbled in less than a year. Thus, it is clear from Walt's analysis that Syria's general alliance preference during the Cold War is sufficiently explained by a desire to balance against external threats. As Dankwart Rustow sums up, "[w]hile many Middle Eastern countries individually nurse expansionist or hegemonic ambitions, all of them collectively, by their preference for the weaker side and their readiness to shift alignments regardless of ideology, offer strong support for the status quo…[T]he pattern of hostility, interaction, and maneuver thus has its self-balancing features."[9]

Thus, it is clear from Walt's analysis that Syria's general alliance preference during the Cold War is sufficiently explained by a desire to balance against external threats.

TABLE 1: SYRIAN ALLIANCES BETWEEN 1955 AND 1979[10]

Alliance Formation Strategy

Arab Solidarity Pact (1955-1956)	Syria aligns with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to *balance* against Iraq and the U.S.-sponsored Baghdad Pact.
Syria - USSR (1955-1958)	Syria *balances* against Iraq, Turkey, and Israel.
United Arab Republic (1958-1961)	Syria unites with Egypt under Nasser to *balance* against internal communist threats and external superpower pressure.[11]
Tripartite Unity Pact (1963)	Syria and Iraq *bandwagon* with Egypt.
Syria - Iraq (1963)	Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath unite to *balance* against Egypt and to fulfill *ideological goals*.
Egypt - Syria (1966-67)	Syria drawn to Egypt to *balance* against Israel.
Syria - USSR (1966-1980s)	Syria seeks to *balance* against the United States, Israel, and other U.S. allies in the Middle East.
Eastern Command (1969)	In a mostly symbolic gesture, Syria joins with Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan in the War of Attrition to *balance* against Israel.
October War Coalition (1971-1974)	Syria allies with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to *balance* against Israel through the planning of an offensive war to regain lost territory.
Syria-Jordan (1975-78)	Syria and Jordan align to *balance* against Israel as Egypt defects from the October War Coalition.
Steadfastness Front (1978-1979)	Syria, S. Yemen, Algeria, and Libya ally to more strongly *balance* against Egypt's peace initiative.

SYRIA AND IRAN

In a region often noted for its rapidly shifting alliances, the Syrian-Iranian partnership stands out for its remarkable durability. Although many attribute the alignment to a common Shiite identity, a more convincing analysis points to shared strategic interests, especially when it comes to warding off perceived threats from common adversaries in Iraq, Israel,

and more recently the United States.[12] An overview of this alliance during the 1980s, the early post-Cold War period, and since September 11 will clearly demonstrate the applicability of the balance of threat theory and the strategy of hard balancing. In particular, this paper will trace developments from the fall of the Soviet Union to the formation of a more aggressive American foreign policy in the Persian Gulf and the Levant—the respective underbellies of Iranian and Syrian security—and show how Syrian-Iranian cooperation deepened in response to perceptions of a common threat.

In The Beginning

On February 12, 1979, Syria became the first Arab state to officially recognize Iran's new revolutionary government. The two countries found common cause in their shared distaste for Saddam Hussein's Iraq. For Syria, the Iraqi wing of the Arab nationalist Ba'ath party posed a threat to Hafez al-Assad's quest for Arab leadership through the same party, as well as to his ambitions for power in Lebanon. [13] For its part, Iran grew angry over Saddam Hussein's efforts to undermine Tehran at home while encroaching on Iranian interests in the Persian Gulf.

The partnership was quickly tested with Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980. In the early months of the war, Syrian airlifts of weapons, medical supplies, and technical experts proved crucial in helping Iran absorb the initial Iraqi offensive. Tehran's opportunity to reciprocate arrived in 1982, following Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Iran helped to found, equip, and train the Shiite organization Hezbollah and, through its proxy, pushed the Israelis back to their security zone in the south—and eventually out of Lebanon entirely.[14]

Post-Cold War Era

The defensive foundations that underpinned the formation of this alliance in the early 1980s continued into the post-Cold War era. As structural realists anticipated, the post-Cold War period witnessed the United States asserting itself more forcefully in the Middle East, with regional states like Syria and Iran increasing their security cooperation as a result. The outlook from Damascus and Tehran at the time is best described by Jubin Goodarzi, who explains: "Washington's pro-Israeli stance in the Arab-Israeli negotiations, its support for the emergence of a Turkish-Israeli alliance after 1996 to isolate Iran and cow Syria into submission, and its willingness to exploit Iran-Gulf Arab differences to justify its military presence and huge arms sales to its regional allies reinvigorated Syrian-Iranian cooperation in the period after the Cold War."[15]

These developments led to the further institutionalization of the Syrian-Iranian partnership. In September 1990, Hafez al-Assad made his first official state visit to Iran since the Islamic Revolution. One month later came the establishment of the Syrian-Iranian Higher Cooperation Committee, a body designed to convene regular meetings between the vice-presidents and foreign ministers of both countries. Policy coordination regarding Hezbollah was a primary result of these meetings, as was joint collaboration on ballistic missile production, undertaken in conjunction with North Korea.[16]

Finally, the post-September 11 period provides the clearest example of Syrian-Iranian hard balancing. Following a brief honeymoon between the Bush Administration and Bashar al-Assad forged by cooperation against their mutual enemy al-Qaeda, Syria grew fearful as the United States prepared to invade Iraq.[17] It is not difficult to imagine Syria's concerns. President George W. Bush's neoconservative administration invaded Iraq under the banner of destroying dictatorial supporters of terrorism, and Bashar al-Assad certainly fit the bill. Despite cooperating with the United States on al-Qaeda, Syria refused to stop supporting Israeli rejectionist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, whom it saw as carrying on a legitimate resistance to an illegal occupation.[18]

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Further, Bush administration officials and supporters made little secret of their desire to send Damascus the way of Baghdad. For example, Richard Perle suggested as early as 2001 that the Syrians might be next on America's hit list after Afghanistan and Iraq.[19] And in April 2003, one month after the U.S. military invaded Iraq, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz warned "[t]here will have to be change in Syria, plainly."[20] In fact, even before September 11 nearly three dozen influential Washington figures, many of whom would play a role in the Bush era's foreign policy, signed a report calling for military intervention in Syria.[21]

Accordingly, Syrian opposition to the war and collaboration with Iran grew hand-in-hand. For one thing, high-level meetings between senior officials increased. Bashar al-Assad visited Tehran in the summer of 2004 and, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the Iranian presidency in 2005,

al-Assad became the first foreign leader to visit him. In 2005, Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Naji al-Utri publicly announced that Syria and Iran presented a "united front" against regional threats, and the two countries signed a defense agreement in June 2006.[22]

The formation and development of the Syrian-Iranian alliance represents a clear case of hard balancing against regional and global threats. The shift in the global balance of power away from bipolarity undeniably contributed to this trend; as a newly unrestrained United States sought to reshape the Middle East, Damascus and Tehran found few alternatives to deeper collaboration as long as they faced a preponderance of military power along their respective borders and, at least under the Bush administration, explicit threats to their sovereignty. To be sure, the causes of this behavior are not entirely a product of the unipolar structure. As mentioned above, the rise of neoconservative influence in Washington in the 1990s, and especially in the post-September 11 period, played a vital role in shaping U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

SYRIA AND THE UNITED STATES

Over the past half century the U.S.-Syria relationship has been marked by alternating periods of conflict and cooperation. Washington has long disapproved of Syrian foreign policies but has nonetheless continued to recognize Syria's vital importance in the region. For example, Washington has maintained regular diplomatic ties with Syria even after placing it on the inaugural list of state sponsors of terror in 1979—recognition it has afforded no other country on that list.[23] The following cases will review two instances of post-Cold War cooperation between Washington and Damascus. The first case demonstrates that the formal alliance during the Persian Gulf War is best explained by the logic of bandwagoning for profit. When the United States solidified its global dominance in the 1990s, Washington was in a unique position to provide Syria with long sought perks in exchange for greater cooperation. The second case argues that Syria's cooperation with Washington's War on Terror in the months following the September 11 attacks is a typical example of regional balancing, as Damascus looked to this outside superpower for support against a common enemy in al-Qaeda.

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The Persian Gulf War

With the crumbling of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the United States and Syria underwent dramatic shifts in antagonism and cooperation. As of early 1990, President Bush remained frustrated with Syrian intransigence on a variety of issues including terrorism, drug trafficking, and Syria's occupation of parts of Lebanon. In April of that year, the State Department issued a statement condemning these actions and reemphasizing the continuation of sanctions on Syria.[24] But when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August, the stage was set for George Bush and Hafez al-Assad to find opportunities for mutual support.

For Syria's part, allying with the United States led to a number of concessions from Washington, some of which furthered regional goals that might not have been achievable otherwise. First, Syria's newfound cooperation eased Washington's diplomatic pressure on Damascus, which no doubt hoped for the removal of sanctions against it. After a September 1990 meeting in Damascus, Secretary of State James Baker exonerated Syria of previous allegations when he said, "[w]e believe that, so far, Syria was put on the terrorist list without any justification."[25] President Hafez al-Assad was also given a seat at the decision-making table regarding regional developments. In November 1990, he met President Bush in Geneva to discuss Kuwait's post-war government, negotiations over ending the civil war in Lebanon, and the Middle East peace process, among other issues.[26] The biggest prize, however, was America's tacit approval for Syria to reestablish and consolidate its hegemony over Lebanon via the 1990 Ta'if Accords.[27]

Post-September 11

The year 2000 witnessed a number of events that dramatically altered the nature of the U.S.-Syrian relationship. First, in May, Israel withdrew the Israel Defense Forces from Lebanon after roughly two decades of occupation. This move threatened to undermine the raison d'etre of Syria's military presence in Lebanon, which was justified under the guise of defending Lebanon from Israeli expansionism.[28] Second, Hafez al-Assad passed away in June after thirty years of rule, leaving his youngest son, Bashar, in charge of the country. Third, in late 2000 George W. Bush won his bid for the U.S. presidency and replaced the liberal order of the previous decade with a more conservative and hawkish worldview. The September 11th attacks took place less than a year into Bush's presidency paving the way for his administration's hard-line policies to take form in the Middle East.

In the aftermath of September 11, President Bush divided the world

between those that would support the U.S. War on Terror and those that would not. He had no interest in distinguishing between terror against Americans and against others. Wishing to avoid America's wrath, Bashar al-Assad at first cooperated in the War on Terror and initiated the delivery of Syrian intelligence on al-Qaeda to the United States. The Syrians allowed U.S. agents into their country to conduct investigations and, on more than one occasion, provided actionable intelligence that thwarted attacks on U.S. targets and saved American lives.[29] As Seymour Hersh notes, "…by early 2002 Syria had emerged as one of the CIA's most effective intelligence allies in the fight against al-Qaeda, providing an outpouring of information that came to an end only with the invasion of Iraq."[30] This was not done entirely out of fear of the United States; as we see more clearly today, Syria has had a long and troubled history with Sunni Islamist groups and Damascus no doubt sought a win-win opportunity to take on a mutual enemy. In other words, Syria aligned with a global superpower to balance against a local enemy.

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Security cooperation between Syria and America did not last long, however. Assad strongly opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq and, as it became clear that Washington would not be dissuaded, Syria soon cut off intelligence sharing and adopted a more hostile stance towards Washington.[31] Rising tensions between the George W. Bush administration and Syria unsurprisingly pushed the latter much closer to Iran.

RAPPROCHEMENT WITH SAUDI ARABIA AND TURKEY

An important feature of Syrian alignment behavior before the onset of the Arab Spring protests was a trend toward rapprochement with long-time regional adversaries Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The nature of Syria's then newfound partnerships spanned a number of spheres, including economic, political, cultural, and military cooperation. To be sure, the extent of Syria's military cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Turkey fell far short of its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, but the implications of these relationships are nonetheless important. Recalling Christopher Layne's notion of leash-slipping, Syria's efforts to mend fences with both Ankara

and Riyadh should be seen as part of Damascus's larger strategy to break out of its international isolation and hedge against regional uncertainty in the mid-2000s while reducing dependence upon, and softly balancing against, both the United States and Iran.

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Syria had been courting Turkey as early as 2003, when the United States stepped up its measures to isolate Damascus for opposing the war in Iraq. In 2004, Bashar al-Assad became the first Syrian president to visit the Turkish capital. One year later, he agreed to settle a decades-long land dispute by relinquishing Syria's claim to the now Turkish province of Hatay.[32] In the economic realm, Syria and Turkey had more recently agreed to a "no-visa" policy along their shared border, resulting in a dramatic increase in tourism and trade. Since then, massive infrastructure, telecommunication, and other deals have been announced further linking the two economies. In April 2009, the two countries carried out their first joint military exercise.[33]

This then-burgeoning friendship—Ankara and Damascus are once again at loggerheads over the current uprising in Syria—is especially significant given that Turkish-Syrian enmity dates as far back as the fall of the Ottoman Empire, when water and land disputes such as the row over Hatay fueled mutual discord. Syria later came to resent Turkey's close relationship with Israel in the latter part of the 1990s, while Turkey took issue with Syria's support of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish terrorist group that planned and launched attacks on Turkey from inside Syrian territory. This latter grievance was the cause of the near-war that almost broke out between Syria and Turkey in 1998, making it all the more telling that in 2007 Syria publicly supported Turkish incursions into Iraq to strike against PKK targets.[34]

Similarly, Syrian relations had been improving with Saudi Arabia around the same time despite a history of tension. The two countries had long been divided by the broader rift between the pro-Western, so-called "moderate" Sunni Arab states like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt and the "radical" entities that ally with Shi'i Iran, among them Syria, Hamas, and

Hezbollah. Hostility worsened with the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a close friend of Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz, which many blamed on Syria. During the July 2006 war in Lebanon, Bashar al-Assad accused King Abdullah and other Arab leaders who criticized Hezbollah—no doubt fearing an extension of Iranian influence in Lebanon—of being "half-men."[35]

But in late 2008, the Syrian-Saudi relationship turned a new leaf. King Abdullah sent his younger brother to Damascus in February 2009, and one month later President Assad arrived in Riyadh to all the regalia befitting a high-level state visit. In October 2009, King Abdullah arrived in Damascus to a similar reception. This coming together of Syria and Saudi Arabia had much to do with their shared interest in checking the growing influence of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

A number of factors explain Syria's efforts to heal old wounds. Certainly one is economic. As Syria transitioned from a socialist to a market-driven economy, it required foreign investment and western technological know-how, both of which were in short supply because of tight economic sanctions put in place by the United States. The newly opened border with Turkey proved one successful avenue, with tourism jumping twelve percent in the first year, and Saudi oil wealth must have also looked attractive.[36]

A related motivation was Syria's desire to end its isolation. After being shunned by the United States, the European Union, and other Arab states, Syria's international reputation deteriorated even further following its implication in the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Regime insiders said of Turkey that Ankara provided "almost literally, a lifeline for us."[37] For its part, Saudi Arabia has provided Damascus with much-needed diplomatic cover to reengage in Lebanese politics. Summarizing these developments, Helena Cobban wrote in 2010, "Damascus no longer has the air of fearfulness and incipient isolation that it had back in 2005 and 2006. The government has allies, both in the region and in the wider world… Syrian officials now sense cautiously that events are shifting in their favor."[38]

To a larger extent the Syrians—and the Turks and Saudis for that matter—appear to have been hedging their bets against future uncertainties in the region. Even before the Arab Spring, a quick survey of the Middle East revealed various flashpoints for instability: in Iraq, the American military drawdown threatened to leave a power vacuum vulnerable to regional actors; Iran's continuing nuclear development left in question how the United States, Israel, and other Arab states would react if and when a red line was crossed; Lebanon's future in light of the Rafiq Hariri tribunal was, and remains, far from certain; and the issue of succession loomed large with

elderly, ailing leaders in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Against this backdrop, Syria was wise to reduce its dependence on Iran and circumvent the need for American support by cultivating better relationships with its neighbors.

Lastly, Syria's partnerships with Turkey and Saudi Arabia may also have reflected an effort to balance against its long-time ally in Tehran. Generally speaking, as Iran's power grows in the region, Syria wants to avoid a situation in which it plays second fiddle to a more powerful ally. More specifically, Syrian interests have recently brushed up against Iran in both Iraq and Lebanon.[39] Hezbollah and Iran had cause for concern that Damascus may have been willing to cash in its Hezbollah bargaining chip if it felt it could acquire its goals through other means, whether through a partnership with other regional states like Turkey and Saudi Arabia or by striking a broader deal with the West. As Cobban affirms, "[m]any Syrian citizens see their ties to Turkey as providing a valuable counterbalance to their government's much older ties to Iran."[40] As for Saudi Arabia, Bashar al-Assad and King Abdullah's decision to fly to Beirut together on the same plane in July 2010 was a deliberate message to Iran and Hezbollah that Syria has other options.[41]

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In sum, Syria responded to isolation, regional uncertainty, and the growing power of both the United States and Iran in the Middle East by building unlikely partnerships with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Damascus's desire for "lifelines" was all the more apparent given that its newfound relationships were with former adversaries. This behavior conforms to the leash-slipping described earlier. As Washington and Tehran encroached on Syria's interests in Lebanon and Iraq, Damascus sought an insurance policy to its north and south. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, for their part, rely on significant western military and political support, and both the mix of uncertainty regarding the future of the United States in the region and their proximity to the Iranian threat served as ample incentives for them to look to Syria for additional means of support.

Still, Syria's behavior does not fit entirely within the leash-slipping box. Before Damascus was fighting for its life, Syria and Saudi Arabia shared a desire not to see Iran achieve too much influence in Lebanon. In that sense, their political cooperation to reduce Iranian influence over

Hezbollah and Beirut can be seen as a form of soft balancing. Syria's relationships with Turkey and Saudi Arabia therefore represented a complicated mix of two alignment formation strategies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The previous section examined five instances of alignment (see Table 2 below). In the first case, Syria allied with Iran in order to balance against external threats stemming from Iraq, Israel, and the United States. When the Cold War ended, the United States wasted little time throwing its weight around in the region, pushing Syria even closer toward Iran. The second case exhibited two different strategies with respect to the United States. During the Persian Gulf War, Syria allied with Washington against Saddam Hussein. Syria sent troops to join the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq, and in exchange the United States provided cover for Syrian ambitions in Lebanon. In its other strategy, Syria reached out to America, albeit cautiously, in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in a textbook example of regional balancing. The final case surveyed Syria's budding relationships with Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the latter half of the 2000s. While these ties have thawed considerably since the start of the Arab Spring, it seems clear that at the time both rapprochements were designed to provide Syria with diplomatic flexibility in a time of great regional uncertainty.

Table 2: Review of Syrian Alliances in Unipolarity Analyzed in this Paper

	Alliance Formation Strategy
Syria and Iran (1979 – present)	Hard Balancing against Iraq, Israel, and the United States
Syria and the United States (1990-1991)	Bandwagoning for Profit
Syria and the United States (2001-2002)	Regional Balancing
Syria and Turkey (2003 – present)	Combination of Leash-slipping and Soft Balancing
Syria and Saudi Arabia (2008 – present)	Combination of Leash-slipping and Soft Balancing

These case studies demonstrate that in conditions of unipolarity, traditional balancing no longer remains Syria's most consistent alignment strategy. The combination of leash-slipping, soft regional and hard balancing, and bandwagoning for profit points to an increased diversity of alliance formation strategies. That Syria's relationships with most of these states represent a combination of strategies speaks to what is not only a larger menu of options but also the greater complexity of bilateral relationships. In sum, Syrian alliance-making since the end of the Cold War has become more diverse, complex, and innovative in response to the increased threats and opportunities that accompanied the international order's transition to unipolarity.

Considering the profound uncertainty concerning Syria today, we must glean the policy implications from these conclusions with caution. That said, a number of points are worth mentioning. First, when a threat to Syria's security increases, especially from global and regional superpowers like the United States and Israel, Damascus tends to reinforce its relationships with close allies like Iran and Hezbollah. This has been made all the more apparent by Bashar al-Assad's response to the ongoing domestic threats to his regime. Absent an overwhelming security threat, however, Syria is wary of these allies encroaching on its core interests of dominating Lebanon, reclaiming the Golan Heights, and consolidating regional predominance; Damascus will therefore not hesitate to balance against them. This demonstrates that Syria's interests under the Ba'athist Assad regime were less malleable than its relationships, and hence suggests that the West's long-sought goal "flipping" Syria is not impossible. America's more recent penchant to pursue this goal through threats and punishments, however, is a nonstarter. Such a strategy will only push a target country closer to its allies—and U.S. adversaries. Instead, this research suggests that a more constructive strategy for bringing about the realignment of another state is to offer rewards or concessions in periods of peace.

Second, as the United States experiences the limitations of its power in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, leash-slipping has emerged as a popular strategic option. As imminent threats to the Syrian regime diminished towards the end of the previous decade, leash-slipping allowed Damascus to hedge against uncertainty by reducing its dependence on more powerful actors and keeping its diplomatic options open. In the long term, outside observers should expect leash-slipping to be a key trend as America's unipolar adventurism decreases. Countries like the United States should also view this trend as an opportunity to weaken ties between adversarial alliances and, as such, should encourage closer ties between a post-Assad Syria and Washington's allies in the region such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. ■

ENDNOTES

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