

The Case for Syrian Involvement in the October War

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IT WAS ELEVEN O’CLOCK in the morning on one of the holiest days of the year. The harsh clacking of fingernails on tabletop starkly reverberated off the walls of Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad’s underground War Room in Damascus, heightening an atmosphere already tense with electric anticipation.¹ The year was 1973, and Assad was about to embark on a major military undertaking for the Syrian army. He had chosen to join the ranks of Egypt in attacking their common strategic and ideological enemy: Israel. This paper seeks to establish and expound on the factors that led to Syria’s decision to attack Israel during the October War of 1973.

Assad’s decision can be attributed to a number of factors that fall into seven basic categories: personal priority, domestic support, regional primacy, territorial acquisition, checkerboard politics, advantageous inevitability, and probability of victory. Like playing cards, individually, these factors offer insufficient explanation, but together, they hold shape, constructing a situation in which Assad’s decision to wage war against Israel can be understood.

PERSONAL PRIORITY

The circumstances surrounding Assad’s rise to power in Syria in 1970 illuminate a portion of the personal motivation behind the autocrat’s resolution to wage war against Israel three years later. Prior to assuming the presidency, Assad had elucidated his priorities in the context of a disagreement with those of the incumbent president of Syria, Salah Jadid. While Jadid’s attention was focused on the notion of internal revolution, Assad’s mind was intent on carrying out an external operation, specifically that of a military dispute with Israel. According to Patrick Seale, author of numerous books on Syria and the Middle East, “In shorthand terms, As[s]ad’s ‘nationalist’ objectives were at odds with [Jadid’s] ‘socialist’ ones.”² Instead

of looking to better the state through inward transformation, Assad directed his gaze outward. Despite the existing emphasis on courting the Soviet Union through domestic improvement and social revolution within Syria, Assad maintained an unwavering interest in regaining lost territory.

Israel's overwhelming victory in June 1967 shaped Assad's personal ambition to regain the Golan Heights that had been lost to Israel three years earlier. According to Seale:

The importance of this moment of national ruin in As[s]ad's career cannot be overestimated. Without a doubt, the defeat was the decisive turning point in his life, jolting him into political maturity and spurring the ambition to rule Syria free from the constraints of colleagues and rivals who he felt had led the country to disaster.³

The territorial losses suffered by Syria as a result of the 1967 War charged Assad's personal commitment to regain the territory for his country.

Not only was Assad's territorial sovereignty threatened, so was his pride. Seale sees Assad's intense determination to engage in battle with Israel as an "obsession," writing that Assad "longed to wipe away the stain of defeat which had affected him personally and profoundly."⁴ Assad's intense internalization of the injustices he felt were perpetrated by Israel against Syria and the Arab people manifested itself as a personal impetus to right these wrongs. This too, served as an underlying factor that motivated Assad's decision to join the 1973 invasion of Israel.

DOMESTIC SUPPORT

Assad's decision to join Egypt in invading Israel during the October War can also be interpreted as an attempt by the Syrian leader to rally domestic support. It is important to note that Assad's ascension to the presidency was the combination of seven years of bloody struggle between rivals for the same esteemed position. Consequently, Assad recognized that in spite of, or perhaps because of, the iron-fisted, authoritarian nature of the regime with which he would govern Syria, he would need the support of a wide popular base within the country.⁵ One can imagine the mindset of he who, after much contention, has finally secured the presidency of a socially fractious, militarily insecure, resource-poor, and financially unstable state in the wake of a shattering defeat at the hands of a smaller neighboring enemy. Such a situation does not bode well for the new leader. His first challenge is to appeal to the people over who he now governs by persuading

them of his legitimacy and of his commitment to the survival of the state and its inhabitants. The most powerful method by which to unite a group of otherwise heterogeneous people is to focus their attention and energies on a common enemy. In this case, Assad was attempting to coalesce his country's diverse population by directing its preexisting national animosity toward a common and established enemy: Israel. Securing domestic backing in this way posed less of a challenge to Assad as the conditions for this manipulation were already present.

The crushing defeat of the Arab world at the hands of Israel in June 1967 can be likened to a tape played over and over again in the psyches of both the Syrian leadership and the Arab masses. Assad shrewdly calculated that the discontent of the masses could be harnessed in a direction that reinforced his leadership potential. Martha Neff Kessler, a former intelligence officer with the Central Intelligence Agency, asserts the value of this issue to the advancement of the Syrian leadership:

[It is crucial to note] the importance of the Golan Heights to Syria from a strategic and historical viewpoint.... Return of the Golan Heights without cessation of any part of it is the one foreign policy objective on which all Syrians can agree and unite. No Syrian government could survive without taking a determined posture on this issue.⁶

In light of Assad's perception that the Syrian people would support an invasion of Israel on either the ground of ideology or the hope of land recovery, his willingness to go to war with Israel can be viewed as a logical tool of public manipulation. By uniting the Syrian people in favor of his policies at the outset of his presidency, Assad was hoping to utilize his time in office as a popular figure, as a wartime president nonetheless, to boost his credibility and legitimacy among the Syrian people.

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REGIONAL PRIMACY

Assad's willingness to join the 1973 War was also a direct result of the losses incurred during the 1967 War. The humiliation brought on by the 1967 loss extended beyond the borders of Syria and even of Egypt; in fact, the sting was felt throughout the body of the entire Arab world. Much of the regional consciousness at this time was comprised of a collective memory of the losses endured by the Arabs in 1967. According to Mohamed Heikal, a minister in Nasser's cabinet, "That defeat had been a complete surprise to everybody.... [N]obody had been prepared for defeat on such a shattering scale. Everybody was shocked...the Arab world was in a state of total confusion...."⁷ In the words of scholar Donald Neff:

The disgrace, the shock and depression, the raw humiliation, had been overwhelming.... [I]t had been a catastrophe, a stunning blow...to...all Arabs.... [Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat...expressed the anguish felt by most Arabs: 'I myself was completely overwhelmed by our defeat. It sank into the very fabric of my consciousness so that I relived it day and night. As its real dimensions were daily revealed to me, my agony intensified....'⁸

For Syria, the 1973 motivation for avenging the extensive regional effects of the 1967 debacle must be examined through a lens of pan-Arabism. At its core, pan-Arabism, the modern movement for political unification among Arab nations, proposes reunification as a means of reestablishing Arab political power. Pan-Arabism existed as a major force, manifesting itself in such powerful ways as the Arab Federation, an attempted unification of Iraq and Jordan in 1958, and the United Arab Republic, a brief unification of Syria and Egypt from 1958-1961. The Ba'ath party served as the principal mechanism by which these ideals of pan-Arabism gained political leverage. Raymon Hinnebusch writes, "It was Syria that gave birth to Ba'[a]thism...."⁹ In Syria, the Ba'ath party spearheaded the ideals of pan-Arabism, intending to infuse the Arab world with a sense of nationalist unity and pride. According to Seale, the Ba'athist theory was a pan-Arab call to "rouse the Arabs from...a living death":

The core of the theory was that the Arabs had every reason to feel proud since they belonged to an ancient race with many glorious achievements to its credit. The Arab nation...was millennial, eternal, and unique, stretching back into the mists of time and forward to a brighter future. To achieve deliverance from backwardness and foreign control the Arabs had to have

faith in their nation and unstinting love for it.... Unity was the necessary medicine for a sick and divided nation: Arabs from the Atlantic to the Gulf belonged together because of bonds of history, religion, language, tradition, and common hopes.¹⁰

By the time of Assad's rise to power, and certainly by the time of his decision to enter the October War, pan-Arab and Ba'athist philosophy had played a pivotal role in shaping Syria's relations with its neighbors in the region.

Furthermore, Assad's desire to emerge as a leader of pan-Arab dogma was spurred on by the timely death of Egyptian President Gamal abd al-Nasser. Until his death in 1970, Nasser had undeniably served as the forerunner of pan-Arab ideology, achieving considerable national popularity and international acclaim for almost single-handedly spearheading the reestablishment of Arab national pride. Upon his assumption of the presidency, Assad aspired to fill the trench dug by Nasser's passing. According to Seale:

As[s]ad was an ardent nationalist who had come to power at the very moment when Nasser's death left the pan-Arab movement leaderless. The temptation to see himself as a possible successor must have been very large and undoubtedly he had a high opinion of himself. Still largely unknown and without Nasser's personal charisma, he could not realistically aspire to fill the gap left by the Egyptian leader, yet he seems to have felt that destiny had chosen him to rescue the Arabs from some of the consequences of Nasser's 1967 blunders—to which Syria, admittedly, and As[s]ad himself had contributed.... So, with the stubborn patience which was the hallmark of his character, he set about preparing for war....¹¹

With Nasser's death, Assad's simultaneous rise to power pulled him into the prime position of fulfilling Nasser's lofty, yet popular, ultimate goal of Arab unity. He saw himself as the possible successor to Nasser, the incumbent champion of pan-Arab nationalism. Such a situation further thrust Assad into the limelight of pan-Arabism, and for the Syrian ruler, the best way to secure this prestigious post was to attack the target of vigorous pan-Arab sentiment: Israel.

TERRITORIAL ACQUISITION

The 1967 War left an elated Israel with the Golan Heights on the Syrian border to the north, the West Bank on the Jordanian border to the east, and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula on the Egyptian border to the southwest.

Assad was determined to regain this lost territory, specifically the Golan Heights, for reasons of honor and strategic foresight. The Golan Heights is comprised of two distinct geographical regions: the Golan Heights proper, approximately 1,000 square kilometers, and the slopes of the Mount Hermon range, approximately 100 square kilometers.¹² The area of the Golan Heights is celebrated for its agricultural fertility, while the area of the Mount Hermon range is renowned for its inherent strategic value. Serving as a virtually insurmountable buffer zone between Israel and Syria, the Mount Hermon range offers unparalleled opportunities to overlook the land that lies beneath it. Rising 2,224 meters above sea level, Mount Hermon overlooks Damascus as the highest mountain peak under Israeli control.¹³ Assad's focus was more intently directed toward the military significance of the Golan. Kessler expounds on the perceived security threat posed by an Israeli hold on the Golan, writing, "As long as the Golan is occupied by Israel, Syrians feel they live under a major threat from an expansionist power." For Assad, the Golan Heights, specifically Mount Hermon, served as a key strategic stronghold for the Syrian army in its entanglements with Israel, and Assad was determined to secure Syrian control over the crucial area.

CHECKERBOARD POLITICS

When asked why Syria invaded Israel in 1973, a friend replied simply, "Because it was there." This gentleman is not a historian; nor is he a political scientist; nor is he scholar of international relations or military strategy. But his immediate reaction reflects a basic understanding of the way in which states intrinsically interact. My friend's comment alludes to a theory known as the "checkerboard theory." The checkerboard theory ultimately falls into the realist camp, a branch of international relations literature that seeks to explain the outbreak of war by attributing the actions of states to the plain selfishness of human nature and to geopolitical construction; accordingly, realist theories maintain that domestic factors are irrelevant in determining the actions of states. Specifically, realist theory rests on the observations that states tend to: 1) ally with states with which they do not share a border, and 2) antagonize states with which they do share a border. In other words, inter-state alliances can simply be attributed to strategic geographic location, with states tending to ally and confront other states according to a checkerboard pattern.

The Middle East is an exemplar of the outcome predicted by this theory. A quick examination of a map of the Middle East attests to the

reality of such an assumption: on one side, natural allies include Egypt, Syria, Iran, Greece, Armenia, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia; on the other side, natural allies include Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Yemen. Of course, this assessment is not foolproof—it would be a stretch to declare Israel and Iraq allies.

Also, despite the fact that Armenia is engaged in alliances against Israel and Azerbaijan, it oftentimes actually does support Israel. Furthermore, it does not go unnoticed that while Saudi Arabia and Kuwait tend to ally against Iraq, they do share a border, and that while Israel and Jordan tend to ally against Syria, they too share a border. That said, just as few theories come without certain holes (however adamantly their proponents may argue to the contrary), so does the checkerboard theory. Like all theories of International Relations, the checkerboard theory cannot explain all political outcomes of the international system. Nonetheless, it presents a useful lens through which to examine state actions in the region. It is worth noting that if the opposite of the checkerboard theory is true, meaning that if states tend to ally with their neighbors, the world would be one all-encompassing allied force. While a diluted version of this may be the intention of certain regional political actors (think pan-Arabism), in reality, this is clearly an unrealistic assessment and therefore cannot be accepted as a legitimate theory, thus leaving the checkerboard theory to suffice in its stead. In this case, Syria's decision to wage war on Israel in 1973 relied less on Assad's personal, political, regional, or territorial ambitions than on the simple fact that Israel constituted a perpetual border threat requiring containment or elimination.

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ADVANTAGEOUS INEVITABILITY

Had the variable of time been removed from the equation of war in 1973, would Assad have readily sent troops to wage bloody battle on his southwestern flank? What role did timing play in Assad's decision to

launch the October War? Did Assad see this war with Israel as the only entanglement in relations between the two countries? I maintain that Assad was able to predict the high probability of future conflagrations on this contentious border. To this end, he must have assumed that since war with Israel was eventually inevitable, it would have been to his advantage to take the initiative, thereby increasing his odds of success.

In 1967, Israel itself proved to Syria the benefits of initiating war. By launching a pre-emptive attack against the Arabs, Israel was able to dramatically augment both its territorial holdings as well as its regional status as a supreme military power. Still reeling from the effects of such a loss, Assad recognized that the prudent solution to the dilemma of inevitable war with a militarily superior state was to instigate war on Syria's terms, thereby surprising Israel and hopefully emerging victorious. The statesman realized that an offensive posture during the October War would present Syria with this auspicious opportunity.

PROBABILITY OF VICTORY

Finally, Assad led Syria to attack Israel in 1973 because he genuinely thought that his military would emerge victorious. He spent the three years between taking office and the outbreak of the 1973 War strengthening Syria's army for the inevitable occasion of facing Israel in battle. The military defeat that had shaken the country six years earlier prompted a colossal overhaul and improvement of Syria's armed forces.¹⁴ According to aviation historian Walter Boyne:

During the months leading up to October 1973, Syria's armed forces underwent significant improvement. Under President Hafiz al-Assad's leadership, the army, once rife with corruption, became far more professional, with well-trained officers leading well-equipped and motivated troops. Seven million Syrians created a fighting force that exceeded in numbers and in armor that of many of the major powers of the world, including England, France, and Italy.¹⁵

In Assad's eyes, a country with such a thoroughly prepared, well-trained army, with the support of virtually the entire Arab world initiating a surprise attack could never stand to lose to its adversary under such favorable circumstances.

Also, Assad believed that the tremendous Arab loss of 1967 passed as somewhat of a fluke. He saw the catastrophe as a temporary lapse in Arab

capability. Seale maintains that:

“[Assad] was convinced that Israel had won the [1967] War by ruse, catching the Arabs napping, but that it was not inherently unbeatable.... Not in the least defeatist, he genuinely believed the Arabs could snatch back and hold some if not all their lost land.”¹⁶

The fierce determination of the Syrian leader seems to have served as an intense heat that warped his perception of the balance of power in the Middle East. Despite the fact that Israel’s defense forces were markedly superior to those of Syria, Assad allowed himself to be aroused by personal and national passions, truly believing that the October War would spawn the perfect opportunity to, if not at least defeat Israel, substantially weaken her, militarily and diplomatically.

CONCLUSION

While the seven rationales that I attribute to Assad’s offensive posture in October 1973 are organized into distinct categories within the study of International Relations, it is easy to see the extent to which they overlap. Although these categories can subsequently be analyzed as projections of classical realism, neo-realism, constructivism, or omni-balancing, Assad’s actions prior to the 1973 War cannot be scrutinized against such a stark backdrop. There is an inescapable sense of interconnectedness that links the factors of Assad’s decision to go to war. Almost every category is laced with the overarching sentiments of pan-Arabism and territorial acquisition (checkerboard politics being the exception as it completely discounts the element of pan-Arabism), and even these two notions cannot be completely isolated. Assad’s decision to wage war on Israel in October of 1973 can be attributed to the following elements: personal priority, domestic support, regional primacy, territorial acquisition, checkerboard politics, advantageous inevitability, and probability of victory. However, an examination of these factors collectively is necessary in understanding Assad’s actions. Like a plastic playing card, one individual element could never hold up on its own. But taken as a unit, these cards seem to sufficiently back each other, creating the façade of a sturdy structure. The fundamental flaw that lay behind the Syrian president’s decision to go to war in 1973 can best be conveyed as such. For as Assad was to discover in the wake of his October 1973 campaign, just one strong gust is enough to bring down a house of cards, leaving the tabletop littered with a scattered mess of kings and aces.

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- ¹ Seale, Patrick. *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1988. p. 202.
- ² Seale, p. 145.
- ³ Seale, p. 143.
- ⁴ Seale, p. 185.
- ⁵ Seale, p. 172.
- ⁶ Kessler, Martha Neff. *Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1987. p. 80.
- ⁷ Heikal, Mohamed. *The Road to Ramadan*. London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1975. p.46
- ⁸ Neff, Donald. *Warriors Against Israel*. Vermont: Amana Books, 1988. p.22.
- ⁹ Hinnebusch, Raymon. *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2002. p.142.
- ¹⁰ Seale, p.31.
- ¹¹ Seale, p.186.
- ¹² *Jewish Virtual Library*. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. "The Golan Heights: Geography, Geology, and History." 2004. <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Peace/golan1.html>.
- ¹³ *Jewish Virtual Library*. American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. "Golan Statistics." 2004. <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Peace/golanstats.html>.
- ¹⁴ Hinnebusch, p. 150.
- ¹⁵ Boyne, Walter J. *The Two O'Clock War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002. p.3.
- ¹⁶ Seale, p.185.