



## The Levant after Kuwait

Ghassan Salamé

**F**or a long time, at least since the Camp David Accords in 1978, international politics in the Levant have been based primarily on the assumption that the conflict between Israel and Syria, and the one opposing the United States and the Soviet Union constituted the principal matrix for analysis. Jordan had been left out of the Levantine war equation since 1967 with its loss of control over the West Bank, a trend later confirmed in 1970 with the expulsion of the PLO guerrillas from the Hashemite kingdom and the absence of the Jordanian army from the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Iraq, for its own part, was involved entirely in Gulf politics and wars, notably a war with Iran which lasted eight full years, compelling Baghdad to swallow its radical opposition to the Camp David Accords in exchange for Egyptian support against Iran. Egypt itself had decidedly chosen peace with Israel, and a gradually strengthened pro-Western alignment.

Meanwhile, Syrian-Israeli competition, somehow reflecting the East-West divide, was being pursued in many ways, most notably through a fierce, multi-faceted war over Lebanon. Hence the largely prevalent idea that the Levant was primarily organised along the sides of a "triangle" comprising Israel, Syria and Lebanon: two major regional actors and the arena for their competition. But the very existence of this so-called "triangle" can be challenged, and what is more, the war over Kuwait in 1991 has greatly affected the dynamics of peace and war in the Levant. Rather than a "triangle", Levantine politics have evolved into a "vicious circle" which the effects of the Gulf crisis can now help to break.



*Western presence in the Levant: Godfred of Bouillon*

### Many sides to every triangle

The existence (or at least, the methodological relevance) of this “triangle” is highly doubtful. Those who have followed the Lebanese War since 1975 know perfectly well that this war had not been primarily driven or fueled by Syrian-Israeli competition, and even less by the local reflection of the East-West conflict, pursued via indigenous proxies, but by a mixture of factors where such a competition plays a relatively secondary role. The competition certainly existed, but its real impact on either one of the two adversaries’ policies or on the evolution of the Lebanese war remains to be demonstrated.

First, there is a serious doubt as to the seriousness of a Syrian-Israeli conflict in general. On Israel’s side, whatever statements are made about “Syrian threats”, the pivotal national issue has been and remains the Palestinian question. Palestinian nationalism, when taken into consideration, compels Israeli leaders to review some of their basic aims, and actually the Zionist programme itself. The attention given to any other issue, to any other “threat”, depends highly on this crucial problem, which many Israelis would like to forget: that they are competing with another people for the same territory, and that this people, through many generations and a number of vicissitudes, is determined to have a state of its own on at least some portions of the former British mandate of Palestine. Even when they do not recognise it publicly, Israelis seem to evaluate any other problem in accordance with this central issue. Some Israelis lately have become much more candid about it. Noteworthy, among others, is Ze’ev Schiff’s plain statement in his most recent book: “Any prospective settlement must involve two main tiers, political and military. The guiding principle in dealing with the political aspect of the conflict is that no resolution of the problem can be reached without a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. In the end, this means a settlement must be reached between Israel and the PLO”.<sup>1</sup>

Second, no war has erupted between Israel and any Arab state—including Syria—since 1973, that is, for the past 18 years. This does not mean that the risks of war are not permanently present, or that Israel and Syria are not putting pressure on each other indirectly, principally by way of the Lebanese factions.

Even less does it mean that Israel and Syria are somehow coordinating their policies, whatever rumours and innuendos conspiracy theorists are spreading. It basically proves that both sides have not been interested in waging a real war against each other (each for different reasons: Syria, because of Israeli military supremacy and the ensuing inevitable defeat, and Israel, because of negative political consequences which might be the result of an unnecessary war). The international system—and the United States in particular—has also been able and willing to prevent such a war.

The absence of direct military confrontation outside the Lebanese territory has been by far the most important feature of the so-called “triangle” during the past two decades. It is in many ways exceptional when looked at in historical perspective. There have been two decades without war, compared with the 8-year interval between the war for Israel’s creation in 1948 and the Suez Canal war in 1956, with the 11 years between Suez and the crushing Arab defeat in 1967, and with the 6 years between the 1967 and the 1973 wars. This prolonged military inactivity on the Middle-Eastern central front explains the real function of Lebanon as a sideshow, and, more precisely, as a place where actual confrontation between Israel and Syria could have only limited objectives (the Syrian missile deployment in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley in spring 1981, and the destruction of these same missiles by Israel’s air force in June 1982), where low-intensity warfare could be conducted with near impunity, through Lebanese and Palestinian militia groups instead of regular armies. Such wars by local, insignificant proxies could be easily waged and easily terminated if and when they reached dangerous levels, and, in normal times, occurred in a setting where the idea of Arab-Israeli confrontation more or less artificially has been kept alive as a device for domestic legitimization purposes.

Third, whatever may be one’s opinion of the seriousness of the Syrian-Israeli conflict in general, it is obvious that Syria’s policy in Lebanon has not been determined primarily by that conflict, nor by a Syrian-Israeli war by proxy on behalf of the two superpowers. The issue of Lebanese-Syrian relations, though related, among other factors, to the Israeli interference in Lebanon’s affairs, historically predates the creation of the state of Israel, and politically speaking,

should be treated on its own as a deeply rooted bilateral problem between so-called "truncated Syria" and Greater Lebanon. The most fruitful way to analyse it is not so much through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but in relation to the acute problems opposing small Arab states to their mightier neighbours, to the traditional use of Lebanon by Syrian and Arab groups to threaten whatever regime is established in Damascus, to the contradiction between the two absolutely different ways in which the sectarian issue has evolved (and has not been solved) in the two neighbouring countries, and last but not least, to the natural opposition between democracy and *laissez-faire* economics on the one hand, and political authoritarianism and directed economy on the other.

In more candid terms, Syrian leaders have never accepted unconditionally the sovereign existence of Lebanon. Some of them relate this reluctance to the fact that Lebanon should have been part of "Greater Syria". Others have never accepted the fact that Syrian opposition groups have traditionally found a refuge in Lebanon. Damascus was also irritated by the fact that Lebanon went through relative economic prosperity while Syria was mismanaging its economy in many decades of Socialist experiments. But these issues were not brought about by the Arab-Israeli conflict; they were only exacerbated by the fact that Lebanon traditionally has chosen not to join other Arab armies in their wars with Israel, a position which has never been truly accepted by the Ba'ath party leaders in Syria.

Fourth, this triangle, if it has existed, would hardly be a closed or even structured one. And a fourth player plays a crucial role in it: the PLO. There are approximately 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon and some 300,000 others in Syria. The PLO's role had been crucial in the first seven years of the war in Lebanon (1975-1982), before their expulsion from Beirut after the Israeli invasion. Later on, Arafat's troops had an important confrontation with Syria in 1983 around the city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon. Like it or not, the PLO has re-emerged in southern Lebanon, gradually recreating a line of demarcation between the Israelis and the Palestinians to the south of Sidon. As for Israel itself, the PLO plays a primary role in the uprising (*intifadah*) on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, attempting in the interim to maintain its role in the Lebanese sideshow. Rather than a "triangle", at the very least, it is a square:

four and not three players are in alliance and/or competition. The re-emergence of the Palestinian factor in southern Lebanon is the signal that in a swampy terrain such as Lebanon, nothing can be considered as definitely settled.

Finally, the so-called "triangle" is largely diluted in Syria's Arab policies and most notably in its central competition (from Damascus point of view) with Iraq, which is arguably the single most important factor in determining Damascus' regional policies. It is surprising that a well informed writer such as Patrick Seale, who in his first book on the subject had so convincingly explained how the fear of Iraq has deeply permeated Syria's politics since this country's independence, utterly could ignore this factor in his second book<sup>2</sup>, as if it had miraculously faded away. Iraq's investment in General Aoun's efforts to dislodge Syria from Lebanon have been a failure, as much as the PLO's efforts to keep a real autonomy of action vis-à-vis Syria in this country. Yet these efforts have clearly shown how vulnerable Syria's position in Lebanon has remained vis-à-vis any other Arab power who would like to challenge it. This was not the first Iraqi investment in Lebanon and would probably not be the last, despite Baghdad's present problems. In some ways, the Arab Tripartite Committee, established during the Arab League Casablanca summit in May 1989, has also been a calculated, though not entirely successful, challenge to Damascus' singlehandedness in dealing with Lebanese affairs.

### **Syria's trouble**

Judging from Syrian reactions to all these military or diplomatic challenges, it is clear that when an Arab government or a group of governments (or the PLO) challenge Syria's handling of Lebanon, Syria's reaction is much more nervous than when the challenge is posed by Israel or the West. In any case, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which began by a startling victory of the Israeli air force over Syria's air force and air defense, immediately led to the strengthening of Syrian-Soviet and Syrian-Iranian relations, in addition to the ensuing rise of Syrian prestige in the area. On the contrary, Syrian-Palestinian or Syrian-Iraqi confrontations (or both) in Lebanon, direct and, more often than not, conducted through local proxies, have led to the embarrassment of the Syrian regime in the Arab world, to tension with Moscow and to some

domestic repercussions as well. This is all the more so because Damascus has viewed any Arab interference in Lebanese affairs as the beginning of an offensive against the Syrian ruling regime, while an Israeli attack is primarily directed against Syrian military capabilities. The first of these two threats has always been viewed in Damascus as the most serious one, because in Syria, as much as in other Arab countries, the *raison de régime* (the rulers' struggle for survival) has always superseded the *raison d'Etat* (national interests as they are normally defined).



*Arabic horse refusing the saddle*

In any case, the volume of Syrian political, military and security investments in Lebanon is by far superior to the investment of any other state, be it an Arab country, a Western one or Israel. Lebanon might have been a useful sideshow

in the Israeli perspective, an alternative to the *intifadah*'s present impasse in the PLO's strategy, or a useful Iraqi device to try to destabilise the regime in Damascus. In comparison, from the Syrian point of view, Lebanon has been an indispensable tool for domestic, regional and international policies. The Syrian discourse on Arab nationalism might remain as empty as it has been in the past. Lebanon has gradually become by far the single most important issue for Syrian leaders. These leaders, and Mr. Asad in person, devote much more time to Lebanese affairs than to any other issue, including some extremely urgent domestic ones. They have battalions of their most loyal and best-trained troops permanently deployed in Lebanon and tend to consider that any challenge they encounter in Lebanon has immediate political repercussions at home.

Syria's almost obsessive interest in Lebanon, then, hardly could be diluted into any triangle: it has a life of its own. Of its 21 years in power since 1970, the Syrian regime for 16 years has been heavily involved in Lebanese matters, Lebanon having become the daily personal business for many high-ranking Syrian officials. In some ways, yes, Syria is stuck with Lebanon. Whether this is true or not, many people believe that a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon would be the beginning of the end for the regime in Syria. This view might be exaggerated, but it constitutes a constraint on Syrian decision-making, as well as on those Lebanese who are eager to keep up certain appearances of their country's sovereignty. Some authors think that this has been a "trap", that Israel and the USA have deliberately sought to "keep Syria busy in Lebanon" as the saying goes. This is possible, yet it does not really explain what more Syria could have done against a militarily superior Israel, with Arab solidarity in such a poor state, had Syria not fallen into this so-called "trap". Meanwhile, since a complete military withdrawal from Lebanon is not seriously considered, Asad's regime has been trying to extract the maximum of political, security and even financial benefits from its presence in this country.

This policy is not met with plain Israeli acceptance. It is true that at certain points in time over the past twenty years, Syria and Israel have been engaged in a serious duel over Lebanon, a duel which reflected Soviet-American competition. This was notably the case in the period between the fall of 1982 and the spring of 1984. The "triangle" then existed in near pristine form. Israel



was occupying one third of Lebanon's territory while the United States was trying to broker a Lebanese-Israeli agreement, which would have given Israel a number of strategic rewards for its invasion. On the other side, Syria, assisted by a number of Lebanese factions as well as by Iran and by Andropov's USSR, was trying to push Israeli troops out of Lebanon, in addition to the Western, American-led multinational forces deployed in Beirut. The war for Lebanon looked then, for a few months in its 16-year life, like a local reflection of the second Cold War opposing Reagan's America to the USSR, each of them manipulating its own client: Syria and Israel.

But with Israel's gradual (though far from complete) withdrawal from Lebanon and the departure of the multinational/western forces in the spring of 1984, this parenthesis in the conflict for the most part has been closed. But as the US Marines had been there during this period, and the Reagan administration then had been deeply involved in Lebanese politics, a sort of myopia has since afflicted American new Cold War-inspired writings on this subject. This myopia practically led some "experts" to consider the 1982-1984 15-month period of international interest in Lebanon as a rule. In fact, this period of intense Syrian-Israeli competition fueled by the two superpowers was to a large extent an exception. By July 1984, Richard Murphy, then newly appointed as Assistant Secretary of State, was telling a congressional subcommittee that Syria was playing "a helpful role in restoring stability in Lebanon". As far as Lebanon was concerned, the Cold War in its Levantine form, was over.

### **A region with a mind of its own**

Recent American writings on the Levant indeed have been dominated by the concept of a "proxy war" delineated according to the East-West conflict and fueled by it. Such a presentation does not necessarily take into account the real dynamics of the conflict. Among experts on the Middle East, the gap between "regionalists" and "globalists" is an old one, the latter defending the "proxy war" concept, and the former minimising extra-regional interferences as the major cause for conflict. Yet the gap is far from being settled. The "regionalists'" arguments have always been, and perhaps now more than ever are more convincing than those of their rivals.<sup>3</sup> Generally, the "globalists'"

views have been afflicted by a political bias in favour of those parties taking advantage of the inclusion of the Middle East in global politics. These parties are basically Israel and the USSR.

Israel has had a deep interest in the presentation of the Arab-Israeli conflict as part of the East-West divide, notably since the 1956 Suez war and the waning of European influence in the Middle East. Such an interpretation was meant to dilute Palestinian legitimate national rights in a global confrontation which was too crucial in the West for it to be able to take into account the plight of a few million Palestinians. The ultimate purpose was of course to cement the American-Israeli special relationship, or to make it special in the first place. Israel would thus become a major beneficiary of the Cold War and of American attempts to exclude the USSR from the Middle East. This was the case with John Foster Dulles after 1957, with Henry Kissinger, and, more recently, with Reagan's launching of the New Cold War. The 1980s were, therefore, a golden era for pro-Israeli writers working for the effective inclusion of Israel in the broad anti-Soviet network the Reagan administration was trying to re-establish in the world.<sup>4</sup>

It has indeed been a systematic Israeli policy to portray Palestinian and Arab nationalism as a tool in Moscow's hands. And this view has been adopted widely by an array of American "experts" on the Middle East. Many European governments have had a difficult time trying to dissociate the two things, but Israel was "a strategic asset" for Reagan's America, and the world was simplistically divided between "freedom fighters" and the "evil empire". Any rapprochement between Arabs and the West was viewed as a threat to Israel's interests, any arms Soviet arms sale to an Arab country was portrayed as yet another example of Moscow's control over its "Arab clients". The clear, repeated differences between the USSR and the Arab countries were trivialised in order to portray Israel as the only pro-Western force in the Levant, and to let the Jewish state monopolise the military, financial and political dividends of such an artificially constructed picture.

Pre-Gorbachev Moscow was the other systematic proponent of this globalist view. What the USSR seemingly sought was the strengthening of a

“progressive front” meant to oppose Israel as well as any pro-Western country in the Middle East. Hence the PLO’s view of the conflict as basically a nationalist one was dismissed by Moscow as parochial and archaic. “Progressive” Arab governments were invited to go beyond nationalism and to transform their struggle against Israel into an ideological battle with “Zionism, imperialism and Arab reactionary regimes”. This presentation, globalist in its own right, was meant to deepen the gap between “progressive” countries and the West, and therefore to make the former even more dependent on and useful to Moscow in the East-West balance of power. A regionlist presentation of the Arab-Israeli conflict was anathema to Israel and to the USSR. Both had a vested interest in maintaining Cold War discourse, and in fact, in preventing any Arab-Western rapprochement.

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This goes back to the “triangle”, as the Syrian-Israeli competition was supposed to be the spine of the New Cold War in the Middle East. Sadat’s Egypt excluded itself from the conflict under the Camp David agreements; Iraq was, at the time, immersed in its deadly war with Iran, and the PLO was defeated in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. With these factors in play, in 1982, the “Syrian-Israeli-competition-as-the-central-Middle-Eastern- vector-of-the-East-West-global-confrontation” theory could thrive and flourish, unimpeded by the numerous calls for more objectivity in the analysis of regional realities. Damascus’ alignment with Moscow was exaggerated: the number and role of Soviet military experts in Syria were inflated. In other words, those who badly needed to insert Israel Arab into Reagan’s global strategy were naturally drawn to the idea of inflating the “Syrian military threat” at a time when Israel was militarily stronger than ever before in its history. The proponents of this view also needed to portray Syria as a “Cuba on the Mediterranean”, a country entirely integrated into the Soviet military network.

This, of course, was partly true, in the sense that after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, a clear-cut Soviet decision apparently was taken to reinforce Syria's military capabilities. The number of Soviet military experts rose to the 6000 range, the anti-aircraft defenses were substantially upgraded, and new weapons such as the SAM-5 or the SS-21 missiles were introduced to the Syrian arsenal. Nevertheless the military balance between Syria and Israel was not seriously affected by these weapons. That is to say Israeli procurements were then so massive and so technologically advanced (not to mention the nuclear edge) that there was no chance for the "strategic parity" publicly sought by Syria to be achieved. The US was firmly committed to keeping the Levant military balance in Israel's favour, and the consciously alarming concerns over Syria's arsenal basically served as an ex-post facto legitimization of this commitment.

Yet for domestic political purposes and as long as an actual confrontation was successfully avoided, Syria was quite content with this description. It had the dual effect of making Syria an indispensable stone in Moscow's Middle-Eastern policy and of portraying Damascus as the real, almost exclusive, enemy of Israel. This view was used to enhance Damascus' standing vis-à-vis its Arab rivals and to legitimate pressures put on Arab oil countries to support financially Syria's military build-up. Hence, a feed-back effect was created and dominated most of the 1980s, during which time Israel tried to propagate a New Cold War view of the Middle East, and Syria was far from opposing it. The two adversaries, each for its own purposes, strengthened the other's discourse. An actual military confrontation being excluded, Lebanon became the necessary place where tension would be fostered in order, among various other purposes, to make this parallel discourse on both sides credible. Thus the emergence of the "triangular" parameter: half-real, half-propaganda.

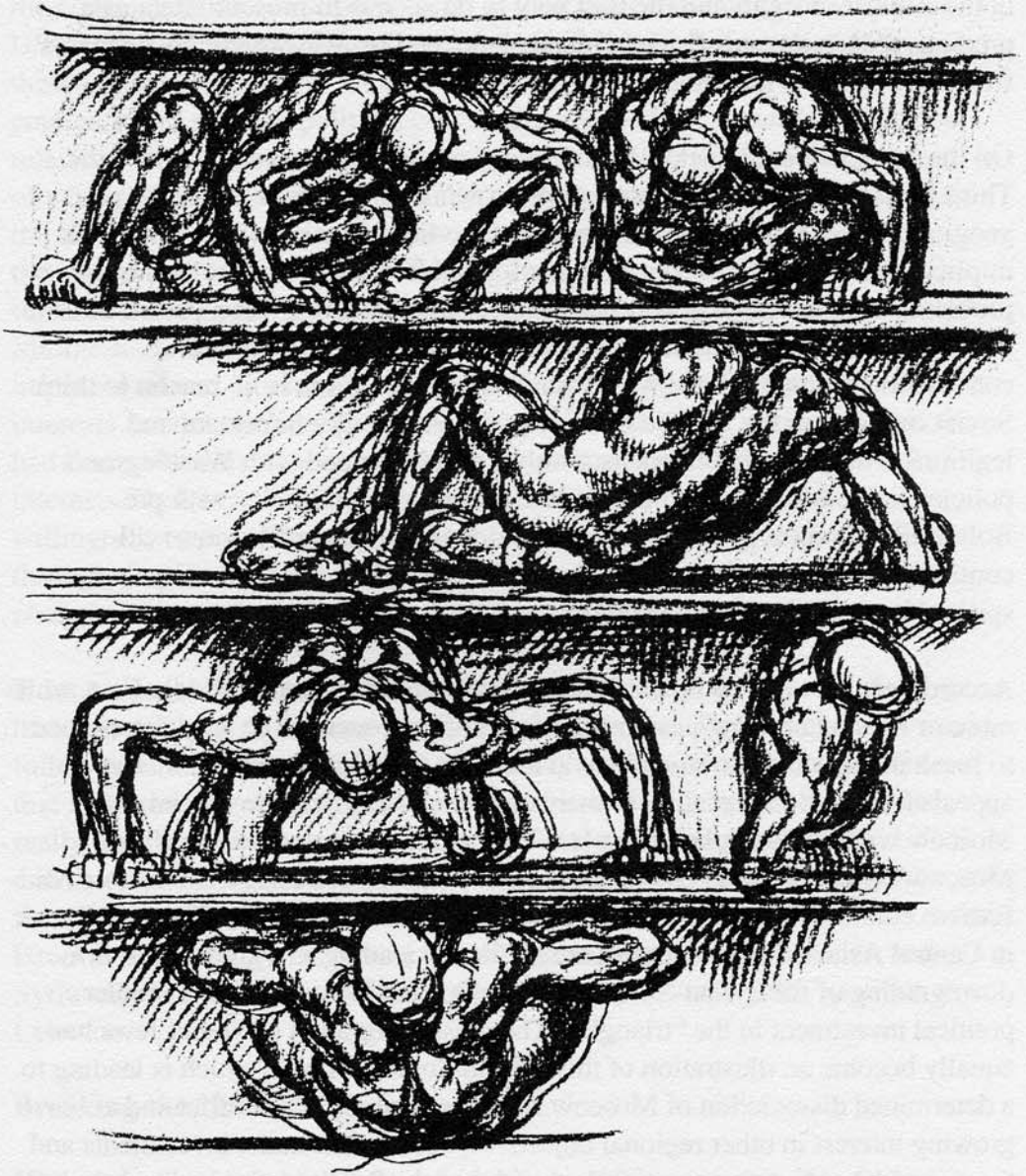
### **Foggy interests**

At the international level, the Middle East has never been just another arena for competition between Moscow and Washington. One common misconception has been to consider the Arab-Israeli conflict as the classical regional incarnation of the East-West divide, for more than any other conflict in the

world, it endangers international security. Those who advocate this position look at a number of cases (1956,1967,1973) where a war in the Middle East had led to a crisis between the two superpowers, leading to a nuclear threat.<sup>5</sup> But the seriousness of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the obvious impact of the Middle-Eastern regional sub-system on the global system are one matter; the reflection of the East-West divide in the area is another. The two factors are related; they are not identical.

On the US side, if American-Israeli relations have been strengthened by the Cold War, everything indicates these relations are going to survive it. In any case, relations between Israel and the USA have not been triggered primarily by Soviet influence in the Middle East. Though the above two processes are mutually beneficial, one could argue that the existence of the State of Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli reliance on the USA are responsible for the extension of Soviet influence in the Middle East. One thing, at least, is not disputable: American influence was already well established in the Middle East, and Soviet influence was seriously weakened when Israel succeeded in obtaining privileged military and diplomatic treatment from the Reagan administration, not to mention more specifically the Strategic Cooperation Agreement signed in 1981 between the two countries intending to associate Israel in the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) program.

One could even add that the inclusion of Israel in Washington's struggle against the "evil empire" was triggered less by strategic considerations than by the necessity to justify, a posteriori, and in America itself, the decision to respond to Israeli arms requests and to ignore Palestinians' rights. It appears almost as an ex post facto device designed to allow pro-Israeli policies to gain support via domestic popularity of the tough Reagan discourse against the USSR. This was the discourse pro-Israeli groups needed to develop and cement their new alliance with the American right. In fact, to portray Israel as the US' "strategic asset" in the Middle East was the natural complement to the rightist slide in American domestic politics. Since its creation, Israel had had its most fervent supporters in American liberal circles. With Reagan's triumph in 1980, and the emergence of conservatism, it was urgent to develop support for Israel



*Balance of power*

in the American right, and the best way to do so was to present Israel as a precious tool in the anti-Soviet crusade launched by Washington in Reagan's first years at the White House.

On the Soviet side, the Middle East has never been just another area of the Third World. Quite to the contrary, Moscow's attention was due to geographic proximity, mutual interests in the field of oil exports, as well as implications for the Soviet empire due to Middle East-related religious problems such as Zionism and Islamic fundamentalism. If for a period of time the Middle East has been integrated into Moscow's world view, and consequently, into the East-West balance of power, there is no reason to think Soviet interests in the Middle East will not remain very important and legitimate, despite what happens with the Cold War and with Washington's policies in the Middle East. This is one area where continuity with pre-Bolshevik Russia is possibly the most evident and where Moscow will continue to seek at the very least the role of an influential regional power, in spite of its declining world status.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, this is why the most recent Soviet policies in the Middle East, while more or less maintaining past investments in Syria, seem to be very determined to break the so-called "triangle", or at least not to be imprisoned in it. The appeals for Saudi financial investments in the USSR, the more crucial role Moscow would like to play in the less difficult and more promising (from Moscow's point of view) Gulf area, and the natural Soviet interest for those Mid-Eastern countries involved in the support of religious and nationalist movements in Central Asia and the Caucasus, are all factors leading to a gradual but firm downgrading of the Syrian-Soviet relationship, and in any case to a smaller political investment in the "triangle". The mass emigration of Soviet Jews has equally become an illustration of this shift in Soviet policies, which is leading to a determined dissociation of Moscow from the Arab-Israeli conflict and a growing interest in other regional objectives, such as oil, trade, investments and the rise of Islamic movements on both sides of the Southern Soviet borders.

**But what of the existence of the two "superpowers"? Is this a permanent fact, or having become accustomed to it, are scholars not bold enough to challenge**

the concept? What is a superpower? Is the USSR still one? Does the USA act in the Middle East as a superpower? It is high time to review these concepts in view of what is happening in the USSR and with the emergence of a strong political pole in Europe, and the numerous problems related to the projection of power, in general. The very definitions of what power is, of what determines a world power's capabilities and of the East-West divide should be reviewed. It is inevitable that with the end of the Cold War, both Washington and Moscow will be drawn towards a more precise and less ideological perception of their interests in the Middle East. Being unequal in terms of proximity, in terms of needs for imported oil and in terms of sheer power, the two capitals might find that their interests are not necessarily contradictory: that for a long period of time, they had been prisoners of a zero-sum-game detrimental to their well-thought interests. Their behaviour during the Gulf crisis, and notably Moscow's willingness to give Washington legal cover for its deployment in the Gulf through the UN Security Council resolutions, is clear indication of a deep change in perceptions.

If such a process of change takes place, the USSR and the US will discover that they are both in favour of a territorial status quo. Two conclusions would follow naturally: that Israel must withdraw from the occupied territories and that Lebanese sovereignty must be re-established in order to break what is really a vicious circle and not a "triangle". It is possible that both the USSR and the US had been heading in this direction since 1988, but then discovered that their cooperation did not automatically translate into regional facts, since Israel is governed by the most expansionist cabinet since its creation and since Syria remains strongly attached to the continuity of "triangular" politics over Lebanon.

### **Breaking the "triangle"**

With the agitated and fruitless decade of the 1980s now past, it is time to consider a few basic questions on the Middle East. What are Israel's objectives beyond the pivotal conflict between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism and, notably, in relation to its northern neighbours? What are Syria's main regional



objectives? To what extent and in what direction is the international system affecting the Levant, now that the neighbouring Gulf region has gone through an unprecedented crisis?

Israel's objectives in the area beyond the immediate Palestinian issue are hotly disputed. Looking at available literature on the country, they range from being almost non-existent (Israel just wants peace with its neighbours) to hegemonic (Israel, beyond the conflict with the Palestinians and/or in order to crush Palestinian nationalism, needs to be the hegemon in the Levant, if not in the entire Middle East and North Africa), to destabilising (Israel wants to remodel the Middle East along the sectarian divide which predominated the thinking behind the creation of the Jewish state itself).

Eradicating tension to the north of Israel seems to be conditioned by a number of factors. The first and by far the most important one is to accept the principle of a fair settlement of the Palestinian question, an issue which goes beyond the limits of this journal. An acceptable settlement would affect the Palestinians' behaviour in Lebanon and would give less importance to Lebanon in both the Israeli and the PLO strategies. Pending such a settlement, the "triangle" would remain dominated by the Arab-Israeli conflict because at least three parties have an obvious interest in this: Israel, Syria and the PLO, not to mention less significant players such as Iran. With such a settlement in hand, one could imagine all kinds of arrangements to secure the future of those Palestinians now living in Lebanon and Syria, arrangements which would allow the Palestinians to decide where to settle. It is possible that large numbers of them would try to settle in places where they would be able to make a living, such as the Gulf, the USA or Australia. Some others might prefer to be naturalised in various countries of the Middle East.

A parallel settlement of the Syrian-Israeli bilateral problem could then be worked out, beginning with the Golan Heights, which has been occupied by Israel since 1967, and was officially annexed by a Knesset vote in 1981. Is it possible to open negotiations on Golan prior to a general settlement, as many observers have rushed to suggest in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis where Damascus found itself supporting American policies? The answer is as clear as it is negative. As long as

the basic issue is not settled, the Syrian government can not begin negotiations along the lines of a Levantine Camp David. What Egypt was able to do unilaterally, the present regime in Syria and possibly all Syrian regimes could not do. This, for the simple reason that Syrian-Palestinian relations are much more intimate, whether in cooperation or in hostility, than Egyptian-Palestinian relations ever were. In Syria, a settlement with Israel entails domestic repercussions of a much deeper nature, which a minority-led regime such as the one presently ruling Syria, indeed all Syrian regimes, could not possibly ignore. The bilateral Syrian-Israeli issue has to be settled either at the same time as a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, or some time afterwards. Otherwise, Israel would push the Syrian government to take a stand which would downplay the specific Golan problem, positioning itself as the staunch defender of the Arab cause on conditions which would probably be much tougher than the PLO's.

In the meanwhile, it is evident that Israel remains attached to its policy in southern Lebanon and to an intensive—though flatly denied—interest in what is happening to the north of the Litani. Israelis tend to present their policies in southern Lebanon as successful; however it remains to be seen if this is still the case with the return of the PLO's forces south of Sidon and in view of Hezbollah influence in southern Lebanon. To lessen the tension, it is essential that Israel does not slip from its occupation by proxy (through the Southern Lebanese Army, created, trained and financed by Israel) into creeping annexation or into attempts to share in southern Lebanon's much coveted water resources. These two factors are certain to antagonise the Lebanese of all factions and to aggravate anti-Israeli militants in the that part of the country.

In waiting for a settlement of the Palestinian issue and for the emergence of a sovereign Lebanese government, Israel should reconsider its negative attitude towards UN troops in southern Lebanon. The end of the Cold war has seen a new Soviet confidence in UN peace-keeping activities which should be considered by Israel as a signal to allow a stronger, more effective UN presence in southern Lebanon. This, in turn, could eventually be accompanied by battalions of a reconstructed Lebanese army. Israelis have systematically dismissed this kind of proposal as unrealistic from their security point of view. Yet this point of view does not take into account the excellent knowledge of

this area which UNIFIL officers have developed over the years or the benefits of the new Soviet attitude towards UN peace-keeping activities in the world, as was clearly reaffirmed during the Gulf crisis. The introduction of contingents coming from significant powers in the world (France, India, Canada and, why not, the USSR itself) could be considered, especially in view of the deteriorating situation in the south, as well as the re-emergence of an Israeli-Palestinian demarcation line, and an end to the role of buffer force played in recent years by the Shi'ites of southern Lebanon.

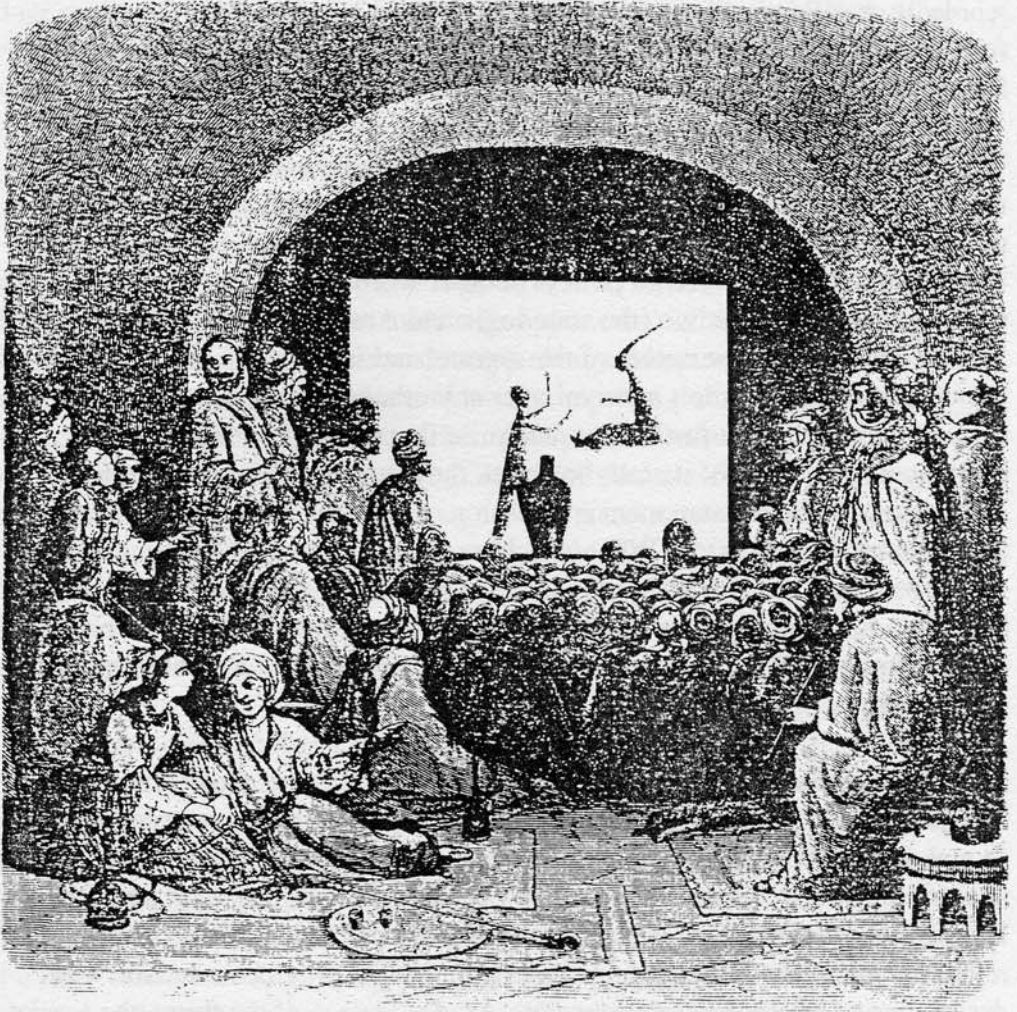
Syria's objectives have also ranged very widely. The dominant view is that from being the target of other powers' competition for influence in the 1950s and the 1960s, Syria, thanks to President Asad's policies since 1970, has become a major player in the game. President Asad, in this sense, is the "Bismarck of the Arab world", and Moscow's first ally in the area.

### **Bismarck of the sands**

Patrick Seale's biography of Asad is by far the most detailed and informed presentation of the dominant view: Asad the intransigent Arab nationalist fighting Israel. "Syria and Israel" writes Seale, "face to face and competing for primacy in the Levant, were doomed to be antagonists".<sup>7</sup> The rest, in Seale's view, is organised around this central, pivotal, almost exclusive factor. Therefore what was Sadat if not "an unsound ally"? "Why did the crucial difference in (1973 Arab) war aims not become plain at the many prewar meetings? The explanation is that Sadat lied to Asad, deliberately deceiving him".<sup>8</sup> Seale, taken by his basic logic, does not hesitate to rewrite post-1973 history as a gigantic Syrian-American confrontation where Israel, the Arab World and the USSR are on the sidelines watching the "Asad-Kissinger duel": "The great tug-of-war between Asad and Kissinger for the body and soul of Egypt began even before the October war came messily to an end.... Whoever won the tug-of-war for Egypt would win the peace and restructure the region to his advantage".<sup>9</sup>

Seale's view of Syria's role in Lebanon is derived from this basic and disputable hypothesis which excludes the *raison de régime* from any Syrian

foreign policy decision. The argument runs along the now well-known lines: Asad is an Arab nationalist, other Arabs are unsound or uncommitted to the conflict with Israel, but this conflict is the pivotal challenge to the Arab world. Hence the conclusion: because Asad is a determined country boy, he is going to try and challenge Israel's hegemony by his own means. The Syrian entrance into the Lebanese quagmire is therefore presented as a natural footnote to this



*Chasing shadows in the Middle East*

central argument. "To resist", says Seale, "Syria needed weight, strategic depth, allies. And so was revived an old idea, predating the Anglo-French carve-up of the region, of the essential unity of the Arab Levant with Damascus as its focus. Both his protective envelope and his area of potential weakness, the Levant was the strategic terrain which Asad now struggled to bring under control".<sup>10</sup> Seale's biography clearly shows this when the author writes, "In Asad's view, Syria and Israel were engaged in a contest for the Levant as a whole"<sup>11</sup>; Asad's view is uncritically adopted by his biographer. On the following page he writes, for himself: "Right across the Levant chessboard Syria and Israel were jockeying for position".

The basic flaw in this reasoning seems to be that either the authors do not recognise the *raison de régime* as the primary motive of the Arab countries' policies or, once they have recognised the *raison de régime*, they ignore the implications it has on foreign policy. In other words, is there only one logic, the state logic, or are there two (the state logic and Arab nationalism in the case of Syria)? They ignore the nature of the regime, and in the view of its rulers, the prevalence of the regime's survival over any other consideration. Or perhaps as is more commonly put forth, they recognise that the regime is strongly motivated by the fear of its fall; however, they then draw domestic policy conclusions from this statement (repression of the opposition, prevalence of the intelligence services, etc.). What is lacking in the analysis of Syrian and other Arab countries' politics is the clear statement that the *raison de régime* is much more of a determining factor than the *raison d'Etat* or the *raison du Prince* and the relation of this basic statement not only to domestic issues but to regional and foreign policy issues as well.

The Syrian-Soviet relationship is of course a central issue. Cold War literature on Syria as the "Cuba on the Mediterranean" has never been very convincing though it is still prevalent in many writings. Although generally sound, Seale's analysis of Soviet-Syrian relations can not avoid the patron-client parameter.<sup>12</sup> Bolder and more accurate is Karsh's conclusion that "neither the patron-client relationship nor the tail-wagging-the-dog paradigm provides a satisfactory description of Moscow's relations with Asad's Syria.... If anything, the Soviet-Syrian interrelationship should be portrayed in terms of a mutually beneficial

strategic interdependence between two allies: a relationship favouring each partner in accordance with the vicissitudes of regional and global affairs".<sup>13</sup>

Thus having clearly distinguished Syria's aims from Moscow's world and Middle-Eastern strategy, what remains to be completed is a precise analysis of both partners' objectives. As far as Syria is concerned, many levels are to be distinguished. Level number one is the regime's basic aim: to survive. Here is a clear problem: the minority-based power group running Syrian affairs since 1970. The two ingredients for survival are first, harsh repression of the opposition, and second, a reasonable level of acceptance by a significant share of the Sunnite majority. The first aim is attained with a number of security organisations led by members of the hegemonic minority, and the second, through a number of political and economic measures.

One category of these measures brings us to level two: If the Syrian minority-dominated regime wants to neutralise its opponents politically within the Syrian Sunnite majority, it has to develop clear, undisputed Syrian nationalist credentials. Accordingly, the second level comprises political stands which strengthen the regime's prestige within the Syrian, traditionally Arab nationalist-oriented Sunnite majority. The best situation for the regime would be when these Sunnis, or at least a significant number among them, conclude: "Security at home has never been as well-insured as it is today", or even better: "Syria has never had, as a country, such a standing in Arab and international affairs before Asad". Asad, therefore, tries to act as a Syrian patriot, while he reinforces the Alawi rule and maintains Arab nationalist discourse.

This discourse establishes the third level: In order to strengthen a minority-based regime, one useful device is to be more Arab than all other Sunnite-Arab rulers, to be less accommodating with Israel than they normally are, to court the dream of "strategic parity" with Israel when they have been engaged in other theatres, to repudiate the principles of "Arab socialism" much later than any other among them, and to keep the old-fashioned form of Arab nationalism at a time when nobody is using this language any longer. It is not that Syrian leaders are necessarily more radical than others; it is that their margin of manoeuvre on anything important is very constrained. It is nevertheless true

that in allying itself with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, Damascus demonstrated that it can take the risk of antagonising a general Arab attitude. But Damascus was somehow saved by the widespread Arab suspicions about Saddam's ultimate intentions as well as by a number of corrective measures by which Damascus tried to demonstrate that its alliance with Tehran might be useful to appease the Iranians vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the Gulf petromonarchies. Asad took another bold stand by associating himself with America against Baghdad during the Gulf crisis, therefore demonstrating that he is always willing to take risks when he feels threatened by Iraq, where the major challenge to his rule over Syria has been traditionally located.

Finally comes level four: the attitude towards the international system. The present Syrian regime desperately needs to be taken seriously by major capitals in the world in order to impress the "crowd back home" and to protect itself against Arab competitors. For this, any show of weakness, any disregard for Syria as a regional power in the Middle East, is deeply resented as a form of conspiracy against the ruling regime. The basic problem is that Asad's regime is building its legitimacy at home on the assumption that it is bringing Syria more influence and prestige than it ever had, and more than it normally deserves in regional affairs: hence, an amount of sensitivity to astute flattery, notably by western leaders (see Seale's astonishing account of Kissinger's treatment of this weakness).

### **Unthinkable war, impossible peace**

An international conference in which Syria would have a say, not only on the Golan Heights issue, but on the Palestinian issue as well, would certainly fit the Syrian regime. In the meantime, it would be unrealistic to expect Syrian unilateral moves towards peace. It also would be unrealistic to expect a Syrian launching of a war. In a way, Damascus is caught in a situation where war is unthinkable and peace is impossible. Syria cannot wage a war, Syria cannot initiate peace, and Lebanon has been paying most of the price for this dual impotence. Only a mixture of outside initiatives on the Arab-Israeli issue and pressures on Syria in Lebanon could gradually move Syria from its difficult posture, and pull Lebanon out of its quagmire. The Taïf agreements signed by

Lebanese parliamentarians in the fall of 1989 provide for a way out of this 16-year impasse. They provide for a Syrian partial withdrawal from Lebanon by September 1992. It is essential that this commitment be respected if the vicious Levantine circle is to be broken.

The superpowers, as mentioned earlier, have played a pivotal role in some periods of time and a secondary role in others. Their influence is regionally disputed sometimes, sought at others. Thus it is sporadic and has to be reasserted in permanence because these regional powers have many more resources with which to put pressure on the international system and on "the two superpowers" than those in most other regional sub-systems.

No one has yet to propose a better idea than an international conference where all these problems could be discussed, and with hope, settled. Admittedly, this idea was unrealistic during the Cold War, especially because both Israel and the USA then felt that such a conference would offer a much better position for their enemies than the balance of forces would have allowed them. How could Washington have accepted a diplomatic bipolarisation when its influence in the field was much stronger than Moscow's? How could Israel have accepted such a conference where Arab parties were expected to outbid each other in nationalist propaganda?

Still, the Cold war is over and everybody is aware of the *real* balance of power between the two "superpowers". In the region this cannot go unnoticed, Syrian rapprochement with Washington being one of its consequences. The "triangle", if ever it existed, looks more and more like a false window on a time-worn intellectual building. On the other hand, the Gulf crisis is also over, and Israel and Syria cannot brandish the "Iraqi threat" any more in order to legitimate their control over Lebanon and over the Palestinians. Small states have been vindicated in the international community's rush to re-establish the sovereignty of a very small (though incredibly rich) country such as Kuwait. Israel cannot go on portraying itself as a US strategic interest in the Middle East, the huge American deployment in the Gulf having clearly shown that the special US-Israeli relationship could be, on the contrary, a burden rather than an asset in the defense of US interests in the region. The whole Middle-East picture is now



deeply affected, and the pursuit of previous “triangular” dynamics in the Levant are much more difficult.

The so-called Levantine “triangle” has been for a long, long time the prison of both the Palestinians and the Lebanese. Those who want it maintained or strengthened are the practical enemies of these two peoples. The international community has been very complacent with this practice, when it was not practically encouraging it. Palestinians find little solace in still-born or step-by-step US initiatives; the Lebanese find no consolation in the Lebanisation of many countries in the world. Sixteen years of war still have not destroyed the Lebanese people’s longing for peace and independence, and three generations of Palestinians subservience have yet to terminate their struggle for a state of their own.

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