The Roots of the Soviet-Syrian Alliance: A Neo-Gramscian Perspective*

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Abstract

The Soviet and Baath regimes enjoyed a consensual relationship between the 1940s and the 1980s. The nature of this relationship was shaped both by the need for an alliance in a period of Cold War bipolarity and by shared common ideological worldviews such as anti-imperialism and socialism. These relations were not free from pragmatism to a certain extent, as the degree of commitment to socialism and Pan-Arabism within the Baath Party sometimes fluctuated. Nevertheless, the generally close relationship between Syria and the USSR cannot be seen as a purely pragmatic strategy; rather, this relationship's ideational, institutional, and material dimensions must be considered as a whole. In this context, this article examines Soviet-Syrian relations from the perspective of neo-Gramscian hegemony to develop a framework for understanding these three key factors behind this alliance.

Keywords: Gramsci, hegemony, the Soviet Union, the Baath Regime, Syria

Jel Codes: F50, N45, P39

Sovyet-Suriye İttifakının Kökenleri: Neo-Gramşiyan Bir Perspektif

Özet

Sovyet ve Baas rejimleri 1940'lardan ve 1980'lere kadar rızaya dayalı bir hegemonik ilişki yaşadılar. Bu ilişkinin doğası, hem Soğuk Savaş'ın yarattığı iki kutuplu dönemde ittifak kurma gerekliliği hem de anti-emperyalizm ve sosyalizm gibi paylaşılan ortak ideolojik dünya görüşleri tarafından şekillendirildi. Baas Partisi içinde sosyalizme ve pan-Arabizme bağlılık düzeyi bazen dalgalansa da, bu ilişkiler genel olarak pragmatizmden bağımsız değildi. Ancak, Suriye ile SSCB arasındaki yakın ilişkileri yalnızca pragmatik bir strateji olarak görmekten ziyade bu ilişkinin düşünsel, kurumsal ve maddi boyutlarının bir bütün olarak ele alınması gerekmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu makale, Sovyetler Birliği-Suriye ilişkilerini bu ittifakın arkasındaki bu üç temel faktörü de anlayarak bir çerçeve geliştirmek için neo-Gramşiyan hegemonya perspektifinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gramşi, hegemonya, Sovyetler Birliği, Baas Rejimi, Suriye

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the most significant characteristic of the international system of its time, the Cold War refers to the period of rivalry between the United States (U.S.), the Soviet Union (USSR), and their respective allies from 1945 to 1991 (Bisley, 2007: 223). This rivalry was driven by fundamental differences in political and economic systems, as well as conflicting geopolitical interests around the world. The Cold War period was characterized by a series of proxy wars, arms races, and propaganda campaigns that spanned the globe as both superpowers sought to establish their dominance and influence in key regions and countries. It was also characterized by a complex web of alliances and institutions, including NATO and the Warsaw Pact, which reinforced the bipolar nature of the global power structure. It was a unique and highly challenging period in world history, which profoundly impacted global politics and international relations (Lebow and Stein, 1994; Gaddis, 2005; Westad, 2017). It is remembered by the actions of many ruling groups that made a preference towards Western or Eastern blocs, increased their military spending in accordance with the rise of their security concerns, and even became involved in fighting against members of the opposite side. Many ruling groups, threatened by these conditions, needed and welcomed the diplomatic and military support that the U.S. or the USSR offered. During this period, they were divided into two groups: the first approached a superpower because it shared its worldview, and the other transformed itself into the discursive defender of the worldview of a superpower for its interests. The first group deeply believed in the ideology of the superpower, and the latter mainly acted pragmatically. Regarding Syria, although the core of the Baath leadership changed over time, the Baathists belonged to the first category as the country shared a lot with other members of that group.

As the Special National Intelligence Estimate (1988: 677-678) expressed in the 1950s, the American government did not believe that the Syrian leadership was ideologically affected by communism. Instead, it was considered that the Baath regime stood with the USSR as a reaction to Western support for Israel and to develop its military and economic capabilities. With such a particular focus on material capabilities the USSR would offer Syria, Soviet-Syrian relations can be called pragmatic, but this would ignore the subsidiary role of institutions and ideas essential to Soviet-Syrian relations. Drawing from these three concepts, this article aims to understand Soviet-Syrian relations from the perspective of the neo-Gramscian hegemony theory.

In neo-Gramscian hegemony, one of the conditions for the continuation of world hegemony depends on the success of the hegemonic ruling group in guaranteeing the consent of its historic bloc for its position. The members of this bloc are the allied social forces and groups in other countries linked by ideology and mutual interests (Cox, 1987: 7); the hegemon needs to resecure their consent in time and, subsequently, material capabilities, institutions, and ideas are addressed to guarantee—and later reguarantee—consent and then form hegemonic relations.

Material capabilities are related to the ability of the ruling class to best manage its material resources in a way that supports its hegemony. They can be used to enroll potential allies to the cause of hegemon or provide support to members of a historic bloc in a particular issue. Their lack would also be a punishment for teaching other groups a lesson. Nevertheless, the lack of managing material capabilities would also be a punishment for the hegemon itself. If a hegemon does not support its allies, it would be abandoned. Thus, addressing material capabilities can be either beneficial or harmful for hegemony. Some ways of managing material capabilities could mean commanding natural resources, industries, armaments, technological means, or wealth (Cox, 1981: 136). In the neo-Gramscian approach, material resources play an important role in supporting groups because hegemony does not only rest upon the embracement of ideas, consent, and institutions (Bieler and Morton, 2004: 87). It also expands towards larger masses through material-based economic development (Augelli and Murphy, 1993: 131).

Institutionalization is a way to strengthen and maintain order. It is closely related to the national-level Gramscian hegemony because institutions might decrease the necessity of using force in domestic conflicts. In this process, as long as subaltern groups accept the existent order as legitimate, powerful groups do not choose to address the use of force. Moreover, the powerful might make limited compromises to guarantee the consent of subaltern groups for its leadership (Cox, 1981: 136-137). Institutions are also outputs of hegemonic world orders that are allowed to be formed by other actors or created by the hegemon itself. They comprise rules that ease the spread of hegemonic world orders and function to legitimize the norms of world hegemonic actors ideologically. They also convert counter-hegemonic ideas and elites of peripheral countries with counter-hegemonic intentions (Cox, 1983: 172-173).

According to Cox, a group of ideas cannot be considered intersubjective for their potential to be approached as collective images of social order by different groups (Cox, 1981: 136). This means there might be several perspectives about the legitimacy of the current power relations or the idea of justice. The rival collective images that clash with each other are significant in terms of creating a potential for a different way of development and a possibility for the birth of an alternative structure (Cox, 1981: 136).

To determine to what extent Soviet-Syrian relations between the 1940s and the 1980s can be evaluated as pragmatic Cold War necessities, this article analyzes Soviet-Syrian relations through the prism of the above-mentioned Coxian concepts. It argues that there was a consensual relationship, military and economic cooperation, institutional ties, and collective images of social order in Soviet-Syrian relations, leading to the conclusion that this relation was generally both hegemonic and non-pragmatic. To support this argument, this article focuses on certain points of Soviet-Syrian relations: the development of their alliance, the ideological and cultural dimensions of their relations, the position of Syria as a Soviet ally during the Cold War era, and the limitations of their alliance.

There is vast literature on the Cold War and Soviet-Syrian relations. Most of these sources were dominated by the realist and liberal perspectives. Although the study benefited from them, there were very few sources that gave a neo-Gramscian perspective to the study. The studies of Aghayev and Katman (2012), Karabulut (2007), Rubin (2007), and Sharnoff (2009) on historical Soviet-Syrian relations contributed greatly to the formation of the historical background of this study. Particular works from Ataman (2012), Dawisha (1980), Ginat (1996), Karsh (1991), Khalidi (1985), Laqueur (1969), Pipes (1986), and Schoenberger and Reich (1975) on the foreign relations of the USSR and Syria were also beneficial to understand the development of the Moscow-Damascus alliance in the Cold War context. Finally, the works of Dawisha (1980), Galvani (1974), Ginat (2000), and Riordan (1974) were important for this study in terms of reflecting the scope of the formal and informal links between the Soviet and Syrian nations. These sources and their related research questions, along with many others in the literature, enabled the conclusion of this study to have a more holistic approach.

2. ORIGINS OF THE MOSCOW-DAMASCUS ALLIANCES

Before the world witnessed the defeat and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following WWI, the Ottomans had ruled the geographical region of Syria for more than four hundred years (Fildis, 2011: 129). During the war, the U.K. promised Syria to the Hashemite family, yet a British-French deal later gave its control to France. Both the Hashemites and France continued their claims over Syria until the French army defeated Hashemite troops and took control in 1920. As a result, a French mandate was established in Syria (Rubin, 2007: 32; Okur, 2009: 141).

During WWII, the French surrendered to the Axis powers, but German control of Syria was prevented when British and the Free French troops entered Syria in 1941. In the same year, France announced

the independence of Syria, but this announcement remained symbolic. In 1945, the termination of the mandate was recognized under the authority of the U.N., and the evacuation of Syria was completed in the following year (Hitti, 1959: 247-249).

The Soviet leadership was not interested in developing relations with the colonial Arab countries before the 1940s; Soviet relations with these countries were mostly shaped by its relations with their mandatory countries in Europe (Dawisha, 1980: 19). During WWII, the USSR was on the side of the Allies (Ro'i, 1974a: 375) and entered the Middle East with the Soviet-British invasion of Iran in August 1941 (Schoenberger and Reich, 1975: 8). Following this, it was estimated that hot conflicts would reach the Gulf region, but the victories of the Allies elsewhere prevented this outcome (Jackson, 2018: xi-xii).

After the end of WWII, Moscow made little effort to develop relations with progressive Arab countries because the Soviet leadership believed that there was no middle camp between the socialists and the capitalists. According to them, only the national liberation movements, whose leaders expressed their commitment to communism, could be backed by the USSR.[3] After Stalin died in 1953, the new Soviet leadership made a policy change and started to solve problems with agreements. It was a decision that would later lead to positive relations with some Middle Eastern countries (Schoenberger and Reich, 1975: 9-10). In this context, the approach to the Arab nationalist movements became friendlier, and the USSR started to see the progressive results of 'military socialism' (Laqueur, 1969: 9).

During the Cold War, the Middle East became a major ground for the American-Soviet rivalry (Reich and Gotowicki, 1994). The USSR was gaining power in the region, while Soviet leaders developed relations with the Middle Eastern countries through diplomacy, political support, economic aid, deployment of military, and arms delivery. Nevertheless, the U.S. opposed the growth of Soviet power in the region and aimed to prevent it as early as 1945 (Campbell, 1972: 126-127). American hegemony was engaged in forming alliances to contain the USSR (Cox, 1981: 140) and shaped new policies over the Middle East as a response to Soviet activities in the region. For instance, the Truman Doctrine of 1947 aimed to protect Greece, Turkey, and, to a lesser extent, Iran from the Soviet threat (Reich and Gotowicki, 1994); the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 foresaw American military interventions in the Middle East to protect legitimate regimes from a communist takeover (Murphy, 2018: 196). Meanwhile, the USSR was taking advantage of the rise of Arab nationalism and the distrust towards the U.S. in the region. It supported the Arab regimes committed to revolutionary change and opposed the more conservative Western-supported regimes (Campbell, 1972: 127).

Under these circumstances, the relations between the Soviet and the Syrian regimes began with a secret agreement signed in 1946 before the independence of Syria from France. This agreement provided Soviet diplomatic, political, and military support for the Syrian regime and was followed by the Soviet-Syrian non-aggression pact in 1950 (Aghayev and Katman, 2012: 2066). During these years, Syria was politically unstable: In the years between 1949 and 1953 only, the country witnessed three coup d'états, twenty-one cabinet reshuffles, and the establishment of two military dictatorships. After the military coup of 1954, the Baath Arab Socialist Party became prominent in the political life of the country (Armaoğlu, 1996: 514). The cadre of the new regime consisted of elites from the minority Alawite sect, which meant that Sunni groups were not able to rule for the first time in the country's modern history. The new regime, desperate to obtain international recognition, made an alliance with the socialist Soviet regime (Ginat, 2000: 150), and the USSR subsequently became a crucial player in Syria during the Baath Party's period of leadership (Aghayev and Katman,

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[3] There were some exceptions to this Soviet intention. For instance, Moscow supported Syria and Lebanon's independence and verbally supported for the Egyptian struggle for independence (Schoenberger and Reich, 1975: 9).

2012: 2066). Syria was the first Arab nation to buy arms from the Soviet Union in 1954 and was assured of Soviet support the following year when it came under pressure to join the Baghdad Pact (FO 371/186904).

The formation of the Baghdad Pact in 1955 led to further improvement in Soviet-Baath relations (Knight, 2015). This pro-Western regional alliance caused tension between the Baath and the neighboring regimes in Iraq and Turkey—members of the same pact—because the Baath regime was threatened with attacks if it continued its principle of non-participation to military blocs and its negative attitude against the pact (Ginat, 1991: 260-262). Thus, the Baath regime perceived the nature of the pact as a threat and became closer to the Soviet regime (Karabulut, 2007: 72). The Soviet side stood with Syria and promised to defend it in case of a conflict with its neighbors (Ginat, 1991: 263).

In September 1955, Shukri al-Quwatli became the President of Syria and began an effective political rapprochement with the Soviet Union and socialist countries. In June 1956, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmitri T. Shepilov, visited Syria and proposed not only economic and political assistance but also military aid (Office Memorandum, 1957: 50). Al-Quwatli became the first head of state to visit the USSR when he traveled to Moscow to meet Khrushchev at the height of the Suez War in 1956 (Moubayed, 2021). When he returned home, he said Syria would have access to weapons and volunteers if needed. He described his negotiations with Soviet officials as "more than successful" (Ro'i, 1974b: 227). During the visit, the Soviet and the Baath regimes signed several agreements worth $500 million in economic and military aid. This amount was to be used to purchase armaments and construct railways, roads, a port, and six airports, along with irrigation and energy projects. The declaration of these agreements the following year led to the emergence of the Syrian Crisis.[4] In this period, General Nizam al-Din, the moderate Chief of Staff of the Syrian Army, was replaced by Colonel Afif al-Bizri, a member of the French Communist Party in his youth. While the influence of the communists was increasing in the country and the Syrian orientation was shifting to the left, this situation caused anxiety in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel, where it was believed that Syria was becoming a Soviet satellite (Armaoğlu, 1996: 514).

The Military Committee of the Baath Party, headed by Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid, seized power and formed a leftist revolutionary government in 1966. The new government was committed to domestic social revolution, the overthrow of all Arab monarchies, the battle against America and Israel, and an alliance with the USSR (Rubin, 2007: 37). The Soviet regime supported the Assad-Jadid regime to prevent the strengthening of the right-wing inside the Baath Party, support the communists to establish themselves, strengthen the revolutionary camp inside Arab world and prevent the Chinese from seizing an opportunity to gain a stronghold in Syria (Ginat, 2000: 163). Between 1954 and 1970, Syria received over $580 million in military aid and $440 million in economic aid from the Eastern Bloc, making it the seventh-largest recipient of Soviet aid (Özkoç, 2008: 143-145).

In 1971, Hafez al-Assad seized control of the party and the government as a result of a bloodless military coup d'état (Galvani, 1974: 10). His accession to power became a positive development in Soviet-Baath relations (Aghayev and Katman, 2012: 2067). Although Assad criticized the dependence of his country on the Soviet regime before 1970 (Karsh, 1991: 6), he gradually realized the importance of a strong supporter in the region (Tudoroiu, 2015: 150). As Lund (2009:7) mentioned,

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[4] The 1957 Syrian Crisis was one of the most serious confrontations of the Cold War in the Middle East. It is related to an asserted Western plot to attack Syria and topple its pro-Soviet government. Then, the American, Soviet, and Turkish troops were deployed to the Turkish-Syrian border, and the American and Soviet foreign ministers made accusations against each other at the U.N. The Crisis passed without serious problems, but it was the beginning of the strategic partnership between Moscow and Damascus that still continues (Easter, 2018: 227).

once in power, Assad acted immediately to reassure the Soviet Union that Syria would continue to be a supporter of the Eastern Bloc. He made a public statement in December 1970 expressing his desire for the Arab world to strengthen its ties with the socialist camp. Assad made it clear that any rumor or statement to the contrary was false and that the Soviet Union was aware of this fact. Within ten weeks of taking office, he made several trips to Moscow to establish a new approach to relations. The new approach involved reducing the use of language and strengthening the bond between the two parties (Primakov, 2010: 105-106). Under his rule, Syria demanded even more economic and military assistance from the Soviets. Although the Soviet and the Baath regimes had kept economic and military ties for years, the Assad era elevated them to a higher level. In 1971, the Soviet Union established its naval military base in the Syrian port city of Tartus in accordance with a deal made with President Assad (Breslauer, 1990; Yılmaz, 2016: 159-161). According to Aghayev and Katman (2012: 2067), Assad chose this path for a multitude of reasons: the country was economically and militarily a Soviet-modeled state that had no alternative in the Cold War bipolarity, his regime was ideologically close to Moscow, and the Baath Party could use aid coming from the Eastern Bloc through its relationship with the Soviet regime. More importantly, Tudoroiu argues that the Assad regime would not have achieved political, economic, and military survival had it not had an external supporter because of the domestic and regional instability of the era. In the end, Baathist Syria was able to become a regional power through Soviet support (Tudoroiu, 2015: 150).

The Syrians, referred to as allies and friends in the Soviet media (Borshchevskaya, 2013), were already one of the most important Soviet partners in the Middle East by the 1950s. However, the Soviet-Baath relationship became even more valuable after Egypt aligned with the U.S. following the 1973 October War and signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1979 (Khlebnikov, 2011: 2). After Moscow lost Cairo, the Baath became the most important Soviet ally in the Arab world (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2014: 375).

The Soviet and the Baath regimes signed an amity and cooperation agreement in 1980. According to the agreement, in case of the existence of a threat to peace and security of one of the sides, the Soviet and the Baath regimes would have to communicate with each other to cooperate in the removal of the threat and the promotion of the reconstruction of peace (Armaoğlu, 1996: 740). This agreement also provided access to a submarine base in Tartus and an air base in Tias to the Soviet regime (Aghayev and Katman, 2012: 2068).

In the mid-1980s, while the economic concerns of the Soviet ruling class were increasing, its ideological concerns ceased to be a priority. Finding economic partners became more important than finding allies in the Middle East (Aghayev and Katman, 2012: 2068). While Soviet economic survival was seen as crucial, Mikhail Gorbachev noticed that the Soviet aid to the Middle East did not bring sufficient economic benefit. Although the regimes of Syria and South Yemen received the most Soviet aid at that time, they had their economic troubles, which made them unlikely to return the favor of the Soviet investment (Shad et al., 1995: 81). In such a period, the Soviet regime decided to withdraw their military experts in Syria after Assad's 1985 visit to the USSR. During this visit, Gorbachev signaled to Assad that the Baath Party was no longer the sole Soviet ally in the Middle East (Dilek, 2017: 62). Subsequently, the Soviet regime established diplomatic relations with Israel and made several decisions that would anger Damascus in the late-1980s (Aghayev and Katman, 2012: 2068).

Between the 1940s and the 1980s, the Soviet and Syrian regimes intended to develop good relations with each other, and the positive cornerstones of their partnership can be evaluated as attempts to establish hegemonic relations. Considering that the Baath was a pro-socialist and pro-Soviet regime that showed a clear tendency towards the Eastern Bloc instead of the Western Bloc in the bipolar

Cold War context, these attempts were successful and a Soviet hegemony[5] over Syria was formed under Baath Party rules. In this sense, the Baath and the leading socialist class in the USSR can also be considered as parts of the same transnational historic bloc that was being shaped around socialist ideology and led by the Soviet ruling class.

3. IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE RELATIONS

The Baath Arab Socialist Party was founded in 1943 by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar and adopted the features of non-alignment and anti-imperialism (Özkoç, 2008: 31-38). The party's constitution defined its ideology as Pan-Arab, socialist, popular, and revolutionary (Baath Party, n.d.). The two essential principles of the party were socialism and Pan-Arabism (Ataman, 2012: 43), and it can be clearly seen in Article 4 of the constitution:

> ... Socialism is a necessity that emanates from the core of Arab Nationalism because it is the most ideal system which allows the Arab People to materialize their potentials and the maturing of their genius in the most perfect manner... (Baath Party, n.d.)

Thus, it is also possible to define the party as the Arab nationalist version of a communist party (Rubin, 2007: 126).

The Arab nationalism the party committed to was secular and not necessarily related to religion. While Islam was used instrumentally by Aflaq (Talhami, 2001: 115), religion was rarely addressed during Hafez al-Assad's long rule (Harvard Divinity School, 2006). Being an Arab was not seen as equal to being a Muslim or a religious person. One of the greatest creations of the Arab people was Islam, but their soul was Arabism (Galvani, 1974: 5).

The pro-Soviet stance of the Baath Party was in accordance with one of its essential principles: socialism (Ataman, 2012: 16). Its sympathy for communism affected the formation of an alliance with Moscow rather than with Washington (Peretz, 1983: 410). Nevertheless, to develop friendly relations with the Soviet ruling class, the Baath regime needed to be more socialist than Arab socialist. Although both the Soviets and Baathists had suspicions about each other in the early stages of Baath rule, this situation partially changed through the reformulation of some of the ideological views of the Baath Party in 1963. This reformulation pleased the Soviet ruling class because some of the concepts were taken from the Marxist-Leninist doctrine rather than Aflaq's Arab socialist understanding (Ginat, 2000: 157). Thus, Baathist rhetoric began to demonstrate strong similarities with earlier Soviet rhetoric regarding ideas on revolutionary change, the role of the party, and the organization of the masses (Meininghaus, 2016: 79).

Other ideological similarities between the Soviet and the Baath regimes were their anti-imperialist character. Syria was not in a position to evaluate the two existent superpower options equally since the U.S. was equated with imperialism in the region during the Cold War. The discovery of oil in the Middle East led to a more active American policy in the region[6] and the U.S. government subsequently

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[5] This study assumes that the USSR intended a world hegemonic project with its ideology, economic relations, and leading class influence. The socialist state was founded following the mobilization of a group of united social forces around similar ideological perspectives and the start of their own rule at the domestic level. Its world hegemonic project was a series of attempts for the expansion of this domestic hegemony. Although it can be asked whether the majority of Soviet citizens supported Soviet policies or the ruling class was actually leading based on consent within the USSR, the answer probably changes in accordance with which nation, region, administration, and glorious or bitter periods of the USSR are being referred to. During the 69 years of the lifetime of a multinational country, it is no surprise to observe hegemonic and non-hegemonic periods.

[6] Examples of this were the overthrow of the nationalist Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953, the entry to Lebanon in favor of the pro-Western Chamoun regime, and the support for the conservative autocratic regimes in the region (Makdisi, 2002: 548).

became a symbol of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism for some regional actors (Makdisi, 2002: 547-549). On the other hand, the USSR was an anti-imperialist country and willing to back Arab regimes wanting to be liberated from the influence of foreign countries (Ginat, 1996: 321). As a socialist country, it had a responsibility to back the newly independent anti-imperialist countries in the region for them to be free from the economic, military, and political oppression of various imperialist countries. Mainly after the mid-1950s, when anti-Western ideas were growing due to the rise of American influence in the Middle East and the British and French intention to maintain their presence in the region, the USSR had a general stance against the policies of these powers over the region. Syria, a newly independent country, now free from imperialist rule, reacted to these policies by distancing itself from the West and developing relations with the USSR (Bekcan, 2019: 51-66).

Indeed, the Baath Party supported a principle of non-commitment to any international camp in the bipolar world, but it always perceived the socialist camp as a positive force because of its anti-imperialist character. For this reason, it did not regard the socialist and capitalist camps as equals. For the party, the socialist camp was more compatible with the interests of the Arab people and Arab states (Rabinovich, 1972: 245). This approval was also shared by the socialist camp: the Soviet regime aided some of the Arab regimes with an expectation that their socialist and Arab nationalist policies would be transformed into sympathy for communism (Shad et al., 1995: 79). According to Dawisha (1975: 421), the Soviet regime would certainly look favorably on the formation of a communist government in the Middle East. If this scenario would not become a reality, at least these regimes would be loyal to Moscow (Shad et al., 1995: 79). Although the Arab regimes had large monetary debts to the USSR and the benefits of the shared economic relations were limited, Moscow chose ideological and political rapprochement with the Middle Eastern regimes in the beginning since they gave more importance to ideological and political rapprochement rather than economic gains (Malashenko, 2013:4).

Moscow cared about solid economic, ideological, and political relations with the Baathists, although they were already pro-socialist. The reason for this decision can be the possibility of losing an ally to the neoliberal capitalist historic bloc in the Cold War conditions. A pro-socialist regime not supported enough by the Soviet ruling class would shift to capitalism and to a world order not approved by Moscow. Apart from this, socialism and anti-imperialism functioned as a connecting feature in Soviet-Syrian relations and lessened their mutual distrust. It was also why many Syrians perceived the socialist camp as the most positive option.

4. CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF THE RELATIONS

Soviet-Baath relations did not only stand on material or ideological aspects. There was also a cultural dimension to their relations, which was important for impacting the Syrian and Soviet populations; this was managed through various strategies. The Soviet understanding of cultural revolution can be given as the first example. This strategy was not planned as a rapid or violent movement but as a period of gradual ideological transformation. It aimed to provide the creation of a new intelligentsia, equal cultural opportunity, democratized culture, and a rapid increase in the educational level (Fitzpatrick, 1974: 33). The communist party led it after it seized political power (Barghoorn, 1958: 45) and was closely related to the promotion of culture as 'the property of the whole people' (Encyclopedia of Russian History, s.v.).

The Soviet ruling class also had a strategy that entailed letting other regimes observe the Soviet model and its development as an example of how to progress. The ruling class understood the political value of the popularization of Soviet culture abroad (Barghoorn, 1958: 45), and it was believed that developed and less developed non-socialist regimes could adopt socialism through the example of the USSR and its allies (Dawisha, 1975: 420). Thus, Soviet cultural policy aimed to develop

a positive image of socialist Soviet civilization for other nations (Barghoorn, 1958: 44), and establishing cultural relations with the USSR made the observation of the Soviet culture possible for future socialist entities (Dawisha, 1975: 420). To achieve this objective, they offered to educate high-achieving individuals from Asia, Africa, and Latin America and to place them alongside Soviet peers in working groups and social gatherings designed to foster friendship. The aim was to create a global intellectual elite supportive of Soviet ideology, but the initial result was an increase in marriages between individuals from different parts of the world (Barry, 2012).

While Arab-Islamic civilization was awakening in Arab countries following their independence, Soviet officials wanted the Arab public to know that Moscow supported their cultural revival. Soviet cultural diplomacy focused on the strengthening of 'the Arab awareness of their own cultural and political independence from a colonial past' (Dawisha, 1975: 423). At this point, the strategy of observing and studying the Soviet example was also used in Soviet-Arab East relations (Dawisha, 1975: 420). For instance, as a clause of a 1946 secret agreement, Soviet and Syrian officials agreed on sending teachers from the USSR to Syria to help with the creation of a native educational system in the country, one that would be free from foreign influence (Ginat, 1991: 89).

Additionally, there were formal and informal cultural activities between the Soviet and Syrian populations. In this context, Moscow did not neglect to develop a program of cultural relations with their counterparts in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq through the exchange of mutual interest groups, performing arts, film, printed media, television, education, radio links, and tourism. In this regard, the Soviet and the Baath regimes signed a cultural agreement in 1956 to exchange experiences in art, education, literature, physical culture, science, and sports. Soon after, several Soviet folklore groups performed in Damascus; a scholarship program was started for Arab Armenians to study at the Armenian State Music Conservatory in Yerevan; and many mutual interest groups, which consisted of artists, musicians, trade union delegates, religious leaders, scientists, sports teams flourished through the exchange. The number of Soviet personnel, particularly academics, sent to Syria as a part of the formal cultural agreements between 1955 and 1970 totaled more than 300 (Dawisha, 1975: 425-434).

Much like other cultural tools, the sport had an important role in the Soviet-Baath cultural and political relations because Soviet strategy for sports was closely related to the Soviet foreign policy line. Soviet leaders believed that sport could be an instrument that would increase support for the communist system and friendly relations within the communist bloc. In this regard, within the five years up to 1971, there were more than 100 Soviet coaches and instructors in charge in the Afro-Asian countries, including Syria. There were also students from these countries who received a Soviet coaching diploma or who graduated from Soviet institutes of physical culture. Furthermore, the Soviet and the Baath regimes signed a five-year sports cooperation agreement in 1972 to organize training and seminars, produce necessary equipment, construct sports facilities, and exchange of matches in both countries (Riordan, 1974: 330-342).

Apart from formal cultural agreements, the Soviet and Syrian people shared many informal activities with each other. Among these populations, intermarriage occurred, many Syrian elites traveled to the USSR for their university education, and many Russians moved to Syria (Borshchevskaya, 2013). Thus, informal cultural activities also contributed to the development of cultural closeness between the Soviet and Syrian populations.

In neo-Gramscian hegemony, a potential world hegemon benefits from the sharing of its culture and values to attract the admiration of other actors (Dirzauskaite and Ilinca, 2017: 38). Cox (1983: 171) accepts culture as a useful tool in the hegemonic struggle of the potential hegemon abroad. In this respect, the above-mentioned Soviet cultural strategies can be evaluated as belonging to neo-

Gramscian hegemony. The Soviet ruling class was seen as intent on spreading its cultural values around the world through these strategies, and some Arab countries, particularly Baathist Syria, were thought of as good places to disseminate norms since Soviet and progressive Arab regimes had ideological similarities.

5. HEGEMONIC RELATIONS DURING THE COLD WAR

During the Cold War, Syrian diplomatic affairs were affected by the alliance with the Soviet regime. Any event or war inevitably placed the Soviets and Baathists together in this period (Karabulut, 2007: 71). The Baathists even became the main Soviet allies in the Middle East, particularly after the loss of Egypt as a Soviet ally in the region. After this event, the last twenty years of the Cold War witnessed an almost ideal type of Soviet-Baath relationship between a superpower and its regional ally (Tudoroiu, 2015: 143, 145).

The close relations between the Soviet and the Baath regimes heavily influenced Syrian foreign policy during the Cold War, and Syria was even known at the time as the 'shadow of the Soviet in the Middle East' by politicians and academics (Aghayev and Katman, 2012: 2068). Although the Baathists avoided being a complete Soviet satellite, their partnership with the USSR crucially influenced their identity, and it developed in a way specific to Third World allies and clients of Moscow. This partnership with the Soviets also placed the Baathists in the anti-Western camp; this situation led to negative relations between the Baath and Western regimes (Tudoroiu, 2015: 145, 150). However, the Baathists cared about what the Soviet goals were (Pipes, 1986: 2) and focused on following the Soviet line in international relations (Ginat, 2000: 166). These examples of closeness do not mean they did not experience difficulties in their relationship. The Soviet and the Baath regimes had different views on some issues, but they could be and were tolerated in the end.

Eastern Bloc-centered international institutions were also influential in Syria during the Cold War because being a Soviet ally also meant being an ally of the Soviet family. A system of international organizations and cooperation programs existed between the USSR and the socialist countries of Asia and Europe (Grzybowski, 1964: 889), and Syria was remarkably attached to this system. Many members of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and the Warsaw Pact established cooperative relations with the Baathists. During this period, Syria was quite dynamic: it celebrated the friendship with Cuba in the twentieth year of Cuban-Syrian diplomatic relations in 1985 with a cable from Assad to Castro, and it hosted a high-ranking official from North Korea, a short-term COMECON observer who brought a message from Kim II-Sung thanking the Syrians for their support of the unification of the two Koreas (Pipes, 1986: 2); it settled with COMECON on a convertible currency for their transactions and welcomed Bulgaria's opening of a Technical Cooperation Offices in the country as part of a COMECON trend of establishing these offices in Africa and Asia (Noumoff, 1980: 1444-1447). In a single month in 1983, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Baathists and each of the regimes in East Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland, along with two agreements with the Rumanian regime; in addition, five delegations among North Korea, Poland, the USSR, Syria, and East Germany were also exchanged. Apart from all of these developments, various participants of the Communist International visited the Assad regime, along with the Communist party members in the opposition from Greece, Italy, and Chile. In return, the Baath representatives joined communist party congresses (Pipes, 1986: 2-4).

The Baath alliance with the USSR also shaped the Syrian military structure. The Syrian military was designed to have a fourth service, the Air Defence Command, which was separate from the army, navy, and air force, similar to the Soviet Troops of Air Defence. The Syrian soldiers who were sent abroad for military training went to Soviet bloc countries, and all foreign military experts based in

Syria came from there. Moreover, some Syrian military uniforms were changed to more closely resemble Soviet ones (Pipes, 1986: 3-4).

Militarily, the Moscow-Damascus alliance meant the presence of Soviet military advisers and the inclusion of Soviet-made tanks, missiles, fighter aircrafts, anti-aircrafts, and other equipment for the Baath regime (Rubin, 2007: 142-143). Almost 90% of Syrian weapons came from the USSR. The Syrian military owned 650 Soviet combat airplanes and approximately 400 Soviet tanks, along with the most sophisticated Soviet air defense system outside of the USSR. Since this air defense system was connected to stations in the USSR and to Soviet ships in the Mediterranean, Syria was also an integral unit of the Soviet security apparatus (Pipes, 1986: 3-4). Besides this, the Soviet administration took a further step in the 1980s and began to supply all of Syrian economic and military needs (Aghayev and Katman, 2012: 2067). This step included the internal protection for Hafez al-Assad through the training of Syrian intelligence officers by KGB advisers when the Muslim Brotherhood revolt was at its highest level in the mid-1980s. Moreover, when this revolt reached Hama, the chief of Syrian internal security, Ali Duba, requested Soviet assistance for this internal conflict, and twelve Soviet military officers, experts in close combat and urban warfare, joined him. Three of these officers were later killed inside the city (Pipes, 1986: 4).

Indeed, the close relations between the Soviet and the Baath regimes during the Cold War led to the development of common perspectives. This is why the Baath regime, non-committal to any bloc, followed the Soviet line in international relations and made a clear choice towards the Eastern Bloc. These preferences can be evaluated as Baath's clear choice in following the Soviet leadership in the formation of a socialist historic bloc in a hegemonic project and establishing diplomatic relations with other members of this bloc.

When the importance of material capabilities in neo-Gramscian hegemony is considered, the value of the Soviet military and economic capabilities assisting the Baath regime during the Cold War can be better understood. Such material assistance was crucial for the creation and continuation of the Soviet hegemonic project because an unassisted and independent Baath Party would have given up consenting to the leadership of the Soviet socialist class or alternatively would have found support from the neoliberal capitalist historic bloc during this period of Cold War bipolarity.

6. LIMITS OF THE ALLIANCE

Despite all of these positive developments, there were also serious disagreements between the Soviet and the Baath regimes that caused tension and even the onset of threats, but that were overcome eventually. Although Moscow and Damascus shared the same opinion on most issues in the Middle East, these differences were singular exceptions (Pipes, 1986: 3).

One disagreement between the Soviet and the Baath regimes was over the Arab-Israeli conflict and the outbreak of the 1973 October War. While Soviet leaders supported a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict under U.N. negotiations, the Baath regime perceived an armed conflict as the only way to deal with the Israelis. Soviet leaders pushed the Baath rulers to participate in the Geneva Forum, especially in terms of their arms-supply cutback. Nevertheless, the Baath leadership chose to launch a war against the Israelis in 1973.[7] It was a failure of the Soviet diplomatic and political capabilities because the Soviet leaders could not succeed in persuading Assad and preventing the outbreak of the fourth Arab-Israeli war (Karsh, 1991: 13-20). Even so, when Syrian forces suffered heavy losses during the conflict, the Soviets assisted them by sending military advisers, weapons, and

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[7] Many Arabs consider that the 1973 October War helped them to regain their honor after their defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (Rubin, 2007: 87).

equipment in 1974. This assistance restored the Syrian forces and increased their overall capabilities (Kirshin, 1998: 65).

There was also a debate over Lebanon between Moscow and Damascus. Lebanon was the ground of a civil war launched in 1975, including members of Sunni, Shiite, Christian, Druze, and Palestinian groups (Sharnoff, 2009). The Baath regime in Syria was active in this conflict because of its military presence in Lebanon. In 1976, the Baathists made a decision to establish a permanent presence in Lebanon, and this decision was not welcomed by the Soviet leaders and caused the most intense tension between Moscow and Damascus in the pre-Gorbachev period (Karsh, 1991: 22). Through a personal letter from Brezhnev to Assad, the Soviet leader criticized the Syrian policy on Lebanon, called for a truce, and threatened with Soviet sanctions if the Syrian army did not withdraw from Lebanon (Le Monde, 1976). Nevertheless, Assad totally ignored the Soviet demand for withdrawal (Karsh, 1991: 24).

Another disagreement that the Soviet and the Baath regimes had was over the leader of the PLO, Yasser Arafat.[8] The PLO was a leftist belligerent group supported by the Soviet ruling class during the Lebanese Civil War (Sharnoff, 2009) and both the PLO and the Baath Party were Soviet allies. However, they fell into a serious conflict under Yasser Arafat and Hafez al-Assad. In 1976, the Baathists initiated a military intervention against the PLO in Lebanon. Total control of the Baathists over Lebanon would mean the ultimate end of the influence of the PLO in the country, and the Soviet regime did not welcome this possible outcome. Nevertheless, the Soviet leaders could not affect the actions of their Baathist allies. When the PLO-Syrian conflicts transformed into hot wars in 1976, 1983, and 1985, the Soviet leadership avoided harming their relationship with the Baath regime—their most valuable remaining Arab ally—but also applied harsh pressure on it (Khalidi, 1985: 722-724, 730). Soviet leaders did not approve of the decisions of Assad toward Arafat, but Assad ignored the Soviet stance (Neumann, 1983-1984: 243). Thus, the Soviet leading class improved relations with the PLO only to see it as belligerent in the conflicts with the Baathists. It was a situation that deeply embarrassed the Soviet administration (Khalidi, 1985: 719).

These crises demonstrating the limits of the Soviet-Baath alliance were experienced when Arab nationalism was more perceptible in Syria. They occurred in the Middle East during the 1970s and the 1980s when the Soviet leadership objected to some of the actions of the Baath regime capable of causing military conflict in the region. This period was also significant for the Arabs because it was immediately after the 1967 Six Day War, which was seen as a dishonorable defeat by the Arabs as a result of the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula. Therefore, this period was characterized by a rise of nationalist sentiments in Syria. During the same years, the Baath regime was interested in the situation in Lebanon and Palestine, which were called as the parts of the Greater Syria region (Rubin, 2007: 84-85).[9] It did not want to be isolated from the decision-making over Lebanon or Palestine, although this would mean

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[8] Arafat and Assad had many disagreements that go back to the 1960s. While the Jadid-Assad regime was sponsoring Arafat's Fatah, Assad viewed Arafat as a tool of his rivals. In 1966, the Assad faction of the regime backed Yousuf al-Urabi, a friend of Assad and a Palestinian in the Syrian army, to replace Arafat as the leader of Fatah, but Arafat or his supporters killed Urabi. It led to Arafat's imprisonment for six weeks and an enmity between Assad and Arafat. In 1970, Assad became influential in preventing Jadid's willingness to aid Arafat against the Jordanian army of King Hussein during the Black September events. In 1972, Assad tried to overthrow Arafat once again by giving his support to Hamdan Ashour, but Arafat was able to overcome this. After the 1982 War, Assad wanted to benefit from the defeat of the PLO in Lebanon to control the organization. Thus, when the biggest anti-Arafat revolt occurred inside Fatah in May 1983, the Syrians helped the rebels seize offices and military equipment belonging to Fatah and arrested the Palestinians who supported Arafat (Rubin, 2007: 39-42, 87-89).

[9] Assad viewed the issues over Palestine as directly related to his country and intended to have a voice in these issues. According to Rubin, Damascus aimed to prevent the independence of Palestine or the control of any Arab regime over Palestine. As Assad stated to Arafat once, the President of Syria believed that a Palestinian entity or Palestinian people did not exist because Palestine was an integral part of Syria. In this respect, it can be considered that Assad would have welcomed the elimination of Yasser Arafat or a powerful PLO as the most influential actor in decisions regarding Palestine.

tension with the PLO and Yasser Arafat. This stance can also be connected to Arab nationalism. The Baathist rulers had nationalistic dreams about ruling over Greater Syria. The disputes between Assad and Arafat, which were far from being a personal rivalry, also need to be considered through the prism of nationalism and the Syrian willingness to make decisions on Lebanon and Palestine by controlling the PLO. Thus, it can be said that these Soviet-Baath disagreements derived from actions influenced by Arab nationalism.

These disagreements also signal the times that the Baath regime did not apply its Cold War habits to follow the Soviet line in international relations. Although this situation can be interpreted as the overweight of the Pan-Arab character among the Pan-Arab and socialist characters of the Baath Party, the Baathists did not ignore the Soviet leading class or end their alliance. Instead, the sides overcame their disagreements. For this reason, it is believed that these disagreements cannot be considered as the end of the Baath Party's consent to the Soviet hegemonic project or the breaking of the hegemonic relationship.

7. CONCLUSION

This article aimed to analyze Soviet-Syrian relations from the perspective of neo-Gramscian hegemony between the 1940s and 1980s in order to understand to what extent their relationship can be evaluated as pragmatic. The neo-Gramscian perspective provided to conclude this relation was generally both hegemonic and non-pragmatic. Hegemonic relations were established between the Soviet ruling class and the Syrian Baathists in the 1940s. It is argued that the Baathists gave consent to the Soviet hegemonic project, as well as the Soviet leadership, in the socialist-historic bloc. The Baathists' anti-imperialist, pro-socialist, and pro-Soviet stance can be accepted as proof of Soviet hegemony over Syria. Although the concept of neo-Gramscian hegemony underlines the significance of such ideational factors, it also recognizes the importance of material capabilities. In this regard, Soviet military and economic capabilities assisting the Baath regime during the Cold War were valuable for creating and continuing the Soviet hegemonic project.

The formation and maintenance of hegemonic relations between the Baath and Soviet regimes were supported and strengthened through cultural and ideological ties. The Cultural Revolution of the USSR aimed to introduce and spread its values and ideology to other nations by establishing cultural relations with them. Therefore, they established formal and informal cultural ties with Syria and other progressive Arab states to show the Soviet example, popularize Soviet culture, and construct a strong historic bloc. It was believed that these strategies would also reguarantee the consent of these regimes to the Soviet-led world hegemonic project and prevent their falling into the hands of the neoliberal capitalist historic bloc. Both regimes had similar worldviews and ideologies, such as socialism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and being against the American-led global order. They also leaned to the same side during the Cold War: the USSR led inside the Eastern Bloc when the Baath regime was much closer to the Soviets than the Western Bloc. When these factors are considered, together with the efforts in establishing cultural relations and following similar foreign policy lines, these states can also be considered as members of the same socialist historic bloc led by the Soviet ruling class.

While the Cold War conditions were the determining factor leading to the formation of such an alliance, several disagreements occurred over the 1973 October War, Lebanon, and Yasser Arafat, mainly because of strong nationalist sentiments in Syria. Nevertheless, these disagreements were tolerated and did not cause the end of the hegemonic relations. The Soviet-Baath alliance weakened in the 1980s when the USSR reevaluated its relationships with other nations due to its economic situation. The partnership finally ended with the collapse of the USSR, and hegemonic relations between Russia and Syria could not survive in the early post-Soviet period. Re-development of this

hegemonic relation was only after Russia adjusted to its new position in the world by the mid-2000s and initiated a new hegemonic project around neoliberal capitalist values this time. Syrians, who supported the Soviet hegemonic project once, were also considered as potential supporters of this project. In this sense, more current developments in Russian-Syrian relations, such as the Syrian talks with the Russian-attended international organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to be a member or an observer or the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war in favor of the Assad regime have been attempts of resecuring Syrian support for a neo-Gramscian sense hegemonic project of Russians.

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