Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

WEATHERING THE STORM: SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER BASHAR AL-ASSAD IN TIMES OF CRISES

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Abstract

This article analyzes foreign policy behaviors of Syria under Bashar al-Assad in times of three crises: the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and the outbreak of Arab Spring in 2011. These three crises, which Bashar al-Assad has faced since he rose to power in 2000, have stemmed from international, regional, domestic environments respectively. The article posits that the Baath regime's security and survival concerns rather than external factors have primarily shaped Syrian foreign policy conducts in times of crises. In the article, it is pointed out that Syria as a weak state has been able to survive these crises that seriously threatened the very existence of the Baath regime thanks to its foreign policy strategies. In this context, the article underlines that President Assad's alignment policy helped Syria as a weak state survive despite domestic and external threats.

Keywords: Syria, Bashar al-Assad, Arab Spring, Lebanon Crisis, Iraq War.

FIRTINAYI ATLATMAK: KRİZ ZAMANLARINDA BEŞAR ESAD YÖNETİMİNDE SURİYE DIŞ POLİTİKASI

Öz

Bu makale, Beşar Esad yönetiminde Suriye'nin karşılaştığı üç kriz dönemindeki dış politika davranışlarını analiz etmektedir: ABD'nin 2003 Irak işgali, Suriye'nin 2005'te Lübnan'dan çekilmesi ve 2011'de Arap Baharının patlak vermesi. Beşar Esad'ın 2000 yılında iktidara gelmesinin ardından karşı karşıya kaldığı bu üç kriz sırasıyla uluslararası, bölgesel ve iç ortamlardan kaynaklanmaktadır. Makale, kriz zamanlarında Suriye'nin dış politika eylemlerini dış faktörlerden ziyade öncelikli olarak Baas rejiminin güvenlik ve beka kaygılarının şekillendirdiğini öne sürmektedir. Makalede, Baas rejiminin varlığını ciddi anlamda tehdit eden bu krizlere rağmen Suriye'nin zayıf bir devlet olarak dış politika stratejileri sayesinde ayakta kalabildiğine işaret edilmiştir. Bu bağlamda, makale Esad'ın ittifak siyasetinin Suriye'nin zayıf bir devlet olarak iç ve dış tehditlere karşı ayakta kalmasına yardım ettiğinin altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, Beşar Esad, Arap Baharı, Lübnan Krizi, Irak Savaşı.

Introduction

Power relations and power differences determine behaviors of states in the international system. Some states are eager to wage war in order to improve their relative positions, which threatens the order within the international system. Due to frequent occurrence of conflicts, analyzing respective capacities of states to safeguard, sustain and advance their national interests is significant. Theories of International Relations (IR) acknowledge the existence of hierarchy among states by paying attention to unequal distribution of power in the international system. In this context, five category of states is mentioned: super powers, great powers, middle powers, small powers (states), and mini-states. Several criteria are used to categorize states such as population, size of land, armed forces, military expenditures, Gross National Product (GNP) and GNP per capita etc. Within the hierarchical order, weak states are characterized by lack of power or strength in relation to great and middle powers and thus they are incessantly preoccupied with their survival in the international system. As weak states do not have power to shape the balance of power in the international system, they prioritize their defense, and their interests and influence are restricted within adjacent areas. Some scholars considered weak states passive and impotent actors in the international system, while admitting their active role at the regional level. Besides, weak states mainly adopt defensive postures against great and super powers, yet they at times challenge and defy stronger states with a certain degree of success (Handel, 2016).

When Bashar al-Assad became Syria's new president after the death of his father Hafez al-Assad in June 2000, Syria was a weak state with limited political, economic and power capabilities in the international system. Although Syria was a vital actor in the Middle East regional system as it possessed significant cards such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, it was a weak state due to its lack of structural power to shape or influence the course of events taking place in the international system. What's more, Syria was a weak state in relation to Türkiye, Iran, Egypt, and Israel regarding its power capability and exercise of power in the Middle East.

Assad witnessed profound changes in the international system since the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., which altered external environment of Syrian foreign policy. The new international order under the aegis of American hegemony in the post-9/11 era curtailed Syria's foreign policy options considerably. In this milieu, Syria as a weak state was badly affected by two external crises: the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Lebanon crisis of 2005. More importantly, the Arab Spring, which led to a brutal civil war in Syria and partitioning of Syrian territories by different actors, dealt a death blow to Syria's regional role. Despite harmful consequences, the Baath regime under the leadership of Assad has been able to weather the storm and to survive these three crises successfully.

This article seeks to explain foreign policy behaviors of Syria as a weak state in times of three crises: the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 and the Arab Spring in 2011. These three cases correspond to external, regional, internal crises respectively, which Bashar al-Assad has faced since he rose to power in 2000. These three cases were chosen as during these crises Syria as a weak state had to deal with the U.S. as the world's sole superpower in the post-Cold War international system. In the article, it is argued that Syria as a weak state has been able to survive despite the crises that seriously threatened the very existence of the Baath regime thanks to its foreign policy strategies. The article contends that the Baath regime's security and survival concerns rather than external determinants have primarily affected Syrian foreign policy decisions and alignment strategies in times of crises. In this context, the article posits that Syria as a weak state has proved its agential power through its foreign policy conducts to maintain its security and interests. Thus, the article contributes to the literature by demonstrating that despite its weakness in the international system Syria has not been a passive or impotent actor, but it has agential power to challenge stronger states and influence trajectory of the events even in times of crises.

1. Case One: Syrian Foreign Policy and the U.S Invasion of Iraq in 2003

9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States can be defined as a watershed in the post-Cold War international system. After the terrorist attacks by al-Qaida, aggressive and belligerent policies of the United States, the world's sole hegemon in the post-Cold War era, toward the Third World countries ushered in a profound transformation in the structure of the international system since the balance of power was harnessed by the unilateral measures of Washington. The new foreign policy orientation of the United States manifested itself during the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Especially, the U.S. invasion of Iraq without the consent of the UN had serious repercussions for the structure of world politics and weak states (Hinnebusch, 2006a).

Syria as a weak state was directly affected by the new international environment and the global war on terrorism under the auspices of the Bush administration in the post-9/11 era. Even before George W. Bush entered the White House in January 2001, Israel's Likud Party-linked neo-cons had begun a propaganda campaign to call on the U.S. to implement sanctions and to use military force against Syria to change the Baathist regime in Damascus (Hinnebusch, 2006b: 130). Hawkish neo-cons immediately utilized the post-9/11 environment as a pretext to punish Syria, which they claimed a threat to the security of the U.S. and Israel. Some of the neo-con congress members also brought up the issue of Syria's stockpiles of chemical weapons and charged Syria with developing nuclear weapons and backing terrorist organizations against Israel such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which were regarded as national resistance organizations by Damascus (Hinnebusch, 2009: 17; Zisser, 2007a: 137).

Syria's young President Bashar al-Assad was aware of Syria's notorious image in Washington and thus he promptly offered aid to the U.S. in the fight against terrorism. Syria's intelligence organizations provided information for CIA officials and carried out joint operations against al-Qaida members. Besides, Assad hosted American delegations in January 2002 to show Syria's hospitality toward the Bush administration. Washington welcomed Assad's commitment to the war on terrorism and fight against al-Qaida (Rubin, 2007: 181-183; Zisser, 2007a: 135-136). On the other hand, while forging cooperation with the U.S. in the global war on terrorism, Assad pursued contradictory policies such as maintaining good relations with the members of Axis of Evil - Iran, Iraq and North Korea - as well as adopting anti-Western, anti-U.S., and radical pan-Arab nationalist rhetoric. By following contradictory policies vis-à-vis the U.S., Assad was indeed misreading the new world order after 9/11 events due to his inexperience in foreign policy affairs (Zisser, 2009: 121-122).

Even though the Bush administration seemed content with Syria's intelligence assistance and disregarded the neo-cons' anti-Syria propaganda for a while, the relationship between the two sides was uneasy. The U.S.-Syrian relations in the post-9/11 world order began to worsen when the Bush administration decided to isolate Iraq to prepare the ground for a future invasion. However, Iraq was vital for Syria's economic survival since Assad had set out to mend fences with the Saddam regime since the fall of 2000 to recover economy through reopening of Kirkuk-Banias oil pipeline, providing 1 billion dollars annually for Syrian economy. Yet, Washington protested Syria's insistence on maintaining ties with Iraq at the expense of UN sanctions (Lesch, 2005: 180-181; Zisser, 2007a: 133). The U.S. zeal for occupying Iraq demonstrated that the Assad regime could no longer play its dual strategy in the global war on terrorism: cooperating with the U.S. against terrorism, but forging close relations with Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah at the same time.

The relationship between the Assad regime and the Bush administration deteriorated when the U.S. invasion of Iraq became imminent. Syria as a non-permanent member of UN Security Council immediately resorted to diplomatic means, one of the strategies of the weak states, to prevent the outbreak of the war. At the same time, Syria voted for Resolution 1441, which reauthorized UN inspections for alleged weapons of mass destructions (WMDs) in Iraq. Assad thought that Resolution 1441 would deprive the neo-cons' pretexts of WMDs and support for al-Qaida to go to war with Iraq.

In addition to the UN, Syria tried to mobilize the Arab League members against the invasion. Even though the Arab states passed a resolution against the war unanimously, some of them openly allied with the U.S. by allowing the positioning of American troops on their soil (Hinnebusch, 2006b: 131-132).

On the eve of the war, Assad denounced reckless aggression of the U.S. and explained that it "*is interested only in gaining control over Iraqi oil and redrawing the map of the region in keeping with its world view*" (Zisser, 2007a: 139). When the U.S. invaded Iraq in March 2003, Syria adopted a strong anti-American stance and emerged as the leading critic of the war in the Arab world. In his interview with *al-Safir* on 27 March 2003, Assad claimed that: "*No doubt the U.S. is a super-power capable of conquering a relatively small country, but... the U.S. and Britain are incapable of controlling all of Iraq. There is now a strong resistance by the army and the people in Iraq*" (Hinnebusch, 2006b: 132; Salloukh, 2009: 161).

Assad did not oppose the invasion with empty words, but he took immediate action. Syria deliberately allowed smuggling of arms and infiltration of thousands of Arab volunteers into Iraq covertly for fighting against the U.S.-led coalition forces. Furthermore, some of the leading officials of the Iraqi Baath Party fled to Syria with the fall of the Saddam regime in Baghdad. Assad had anticipated a six-month resistance by the Saddam regime, but he was frustrated by the capture of Baghdad by the U.S.-led coalition forces in April 2003. Upon the quick victory of the coalition forces, hawkish neo-cons in the Bush administration began to propagate regime change in Damascus (Salloukh, 2009: 164; Ziadeh, 2011: 93). Accordingly, Secretary of State Colin Powell threatened Syria with imposing economic sanctions and President Bush charged Syria with developing chemical weapons, which would result in acting against Syria (Lesch, 2005: 184; Ziadeh, 2011: 93). The early U.S. punishment of Syria came with the bombing of the Syrian trade center in Baghdad and closing the Kirkuk-Banias oil pipeline (Hinnebusch, 2006b: 132).

Why Assad objected to the invasion of Iraq? It can be argued that Assad opposed the invasion of Iraq due to Syria's Arab nationalist identity and its place in the Middle East as the "beating heart of Arab nationalism" against Western imperialism (Hinnebusch, 2009: 18). Having deep anti-American sentiments, Syrian public opinion also strongly rejected the invasion of a fellow Arab country and thousands of Syrians took to the streets of Damascus to protest the unjust war (Zisser, 2007a: 139-140). Moreover, Assad probably aimed at boosting the legitimacy of his Alawite-dominated oppressive regime by adopting Arab nationalist stance (Kandil, 2008: 421-422), which was in decline since the crumbling of the Damascus Spring in 2000-2001, in the eyes of the Syrian people (Zisser, 2007a: 77-98). The Iraq war also led to emergence of solidarity between the regime and the people from different sects, ages and classes due to American imperialism in the Middle East and Assad's standing against the war (Hinnebusch, 2009: 140). Assad's choice not to participate in the war obviously reflected the public mood in Syria (Hinnebusch, 2006a: 455).

Syria as a weak state could not naturally utilize power vis-à-vis the United States. Therefore, the Bush administration continued to exert pressure on Syria after the fall of Baghdad. Under heavy U.S. pressure, Syria closed four Iraqi border posts in April 2003 and officially rejected holding of Saddam's millions of dollars in the Syrian banks, infiltration of resistance volunteers into Iraq passing through Syrian territories and harboring of senior Iraqi officials in Syria (Hinnebusch, 2006b: 132; Rubin, 2007: 193-194). U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus on 3 May 2003 with a long list of demands. The list included a full-scale cooperation with the U.S. in the global war on terrorism and Iraq, strong control of Syrian-Iraqi border, putting an end to Syria's support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, full withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, the disarmament of Hezbollah and so on (Salloukh, 2009: 164; Zisser, 2007a: 141). The list was unacceptable for Assad, but he once again decided to play his dual game or middle way strategy between full subordination to

Washington's demands and full defiance of the hegemon, which was defined as zigzag policy between principle and pressure by Hinnebusch (2006b: 133).

In order to avoid an attack by the hegemon, Assad followed appeasement policy without damaging security of the regime. Assad had declared beforehand that Syria would not accept a puppet regime ruled by the imperialists in Baghdad, but he unwillingly complied with UNSC Resolution 1483 on 22 May 2003, which allowed the coalition forces to use Iraq's oil money. Furthermore, even though Syria declined to recognize U.S.-designed Iraq Governing Council (IGC) and even propagated for non-recognition in the Arab League and OPEC, Syria voted for UN Resolution 1551 in July 2003, which called for action against terrorist infiltration into Iraq and accepted IGC as the sovereign representative of Iraq until the establishment of the internationally-recognized government. While Syria had to pursue policies in accordance with the U.S. demands, Assad and his entourage welcomed Sunni opposition figures and declared support albeit non-military one to Iraqi people against invasion (Hinnebusch, 2006b: 133). In fact, Assad's aim was to sabotage the U.S.-led coalition forces and to turn Iraq into another Vietnam by channeling resistance volunteers and arms into Iraq (Salloukh, 2009: 165).

Assad also thought that he had enough cards in the Middle East to persuade the U.S. of Syria's centrality in the Arab-Israeli peace process and regional stability. However, Assad's middle way and appeasement strategies did not work and the Bush administration along with neo-cons continued to exert pressure on Syria. The ongoing pressures resulted in further concessions such as tightening the border with Iraq and discouraging Hezbollah from carrying operations against Israel in Shebaa farms in Southern Lebanon (Hinnebusch, 2009: 19-20). When Israel bombed a Palestinian training camp near Damascus in October 2003, Washington backed Israel's aggression as a legitimate measure against terrorism (Ziadeh, 2011: 96; Zisser, 2007a: 142). The most striking measure of the U.S. against the Assad regime came in December 2003 when the U.S. Congress passed the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act (SALSA). With the passing of the bill, the U.S. demanded that Syria stop supporting terrorist organizations, occupying Lebanon, developing WMDs and creating problems in Iraq. If Syria did not fulfill these obligations, Washington would impose sanctions on Syria (Rubin, 2007: 196). When President Bush signed the implementing order of SALSA in May 2004, the U.S. stopped export of American goods into Syria and imposed economic sanctions on Syrian Trade Bank, which badly affected Syria's transactions with international banks and integration of Syrian economy into the global economic system (Zisser, 2007a: 142-144; Zisser, 2009: 126).

In Erling Bjøl's conceptualization (1971), security geography signifies a weak state's location and its remoteness from a hostile great power. Syria's security geography was profoundly altered after the invasion of Iraq. Syria began to feel sandwiched between Israel in the West and its staunch ally the U.S. in the East (Hinnebusch, 2009: 9). Assad thought that Syria would probably be the next target after the conquest of Iraq. He was aware that the Bush administration and its neo-con members turned out to be a serious threat to the very existence of the regime. Neo-cons had been calling on the U.S. to launch military attack on Syria and reshape the Middle East politics for the sake of Israel's security for a long time. Assad believed that subordinating to the demands of the Bush administration and bandwagoning with the U.S. would mean surrendering himself to Syria's chief adversary Israel (Zisser, 2007a: 140). Hence, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa publicly explained that U.S. policy was captured by extremist and anti-Arab "neo-conservative gang that surrounds President Bush" (Hinnebusch, 2006b: 135).

Syria as a weak state openly chose to balance and challenge the U.S. during the invasion of Iraq. So, how can we explain a weak state's defiance of the world's sole hegemon during the Iraq War and why did it choose to behave in that way in time of an international crisis? "Weak states are more likely to bandwagon than strong ones - for two reasons: they are more vulnerable to pressure, and

they can do little to determine their own fates" as argued by Stephen Walt (1987: 173). Yet, Walt's balance of threat theory does not account for Syria's behavior as a weak state during the invasion of Iraq since it opted to balance the U.S. despite the threat of immediate attack by the hegemon. Therefore, it can be argued that the answer to Syria's choice lies in the domestic sphere. Assad obviously considered the occupation of Iraq as a dire threat to his regime's security and survival and decided to protect his regime's existence. Thus, Assad's concerns about regime security and survival in a volatile region explain defiance of Washington.

What could be the way of protecting the regime? After assuming power, Assad was aware that security and survival of the regime could be sustained via alignments. As the 9/11 events and the Iraq War heightened Syria's sense of vulnerability as a weak state, Assad began to deepen alignments at the regional and international levels in order cope with economic sanctions and avoid menaces of the U.S. and Israel. Assad had set out to develop economic and military cooperation with the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government of Türkiye since the spring of 2002. During and aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, rapprochement between Damascus and Ankara accelerated further since both countries were against the unjust war in Iraq. Following mutual visits, Türkiye and Syria signed several trade, agriculture, investment, culture and security agreements. While the tension between Syria and Israel escalated during 2003-2004, Syria successfully aligned with Türkiye, Israel's most significant ally against Syria in the 1990s (Lawson, 2009: 188-192).

In addition to Türkiye, Assad sought to improve Syria's relations with the European Union (EU) within the framework of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership program. While Syria was under heavy pressure by the U.S. in the second half of 2003, an EU delegation went to Damascus in December 2003 on the basis of policy of engagement to support domestic political and economic reform in Syria. The EU initiated an economic deal, which allowed Syria to sell goods to European countries. The soft policy of the EU precisely undermined the sanctions of the U.S. against Syria. Needless to say, Syria maintained its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah albeit threats of the U.S. during the invasion of Iraq (Rubin, 2007: 197).

2. Case Two: Syrian Foreign Policy and the Lebanon Crisis of 2005

The worsening of the U.S.-Syrian relations continued apace during 2004 due to volunteers' crossings of the Syrian-Iraqi border, the attacks of the Iraqi resistance groups against the coalition forces and Saddam's lost million dollars (Zisser, 2007a: 143-144). Assad sought to reduce the tension between the two countries by offering the start of peace negotiations with Israel. However, both Tel Aviv and Washington disregarded Assad's initiative due to his support for terrorist organizations (Hinnebusch, 2009: 19-20; Zisser, 2007a: 167). Washington's desire to make Syria pay its defiance and backing resistance groups in Iraq culminated in a regional crisis regarding Lebanon in late 2004. In the minds of the neo-cons of the Bush administration, Lebanon had long been Syria's Achilles' heel (Leverett, 2005: 144).

History of Syria's involvement in Lebanon goes back to Hafez al-Assad's decision to intervene in the Lebanon Civil War in June 1976. Benjamin Miller's conceptualization of the state-to-nation balance (2009), which means the degree of congruence between the boundaries of the state and identity of the main ethnic and national groups within that state, is highly explanatory to understand the revisionist nature of Syrian foreign policy toward Lebanon since 1976. Since modern Syria was an incongruent entity carved out of Greater Syrian territories, it was an unsatisfied and irredentist state claiming existence of common descendants and historical rights over Lebanon. Syrian statesmen deemed Lebanon as Syria's natural extension and a vital card as well as a focal point for Syria's economic and security interests in the Middle East. In this context, existence of Syrian troops in Lebanon was essential for Syria's security since Israel could launch military attack via the Beqaa Valley to the Western parts of the country. Furthermore, Syria provided Hezbollah, its key proxy and chief ally in Lebanon, with weapons against Israeli threat to maintain balance of power in the region. Through

Lebanon and Hezbollah, Syria was also able to reach and back Hamas and Islamic Jihad (Hinnebusch, 2009: 20). Lebanon turned out to be more important for Syria than previous decades especially after the fall of Baghdad.

In September 2004, Assad made a huge mistake when he masterminded a constitutional change to extend his loyal ally Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's term for three years in office. French President Jacques Chirac had been long disturbed by Syria's meddling in Lebanese domestic politics to balance Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, who was France's chief ally in the country. Against Assad's move to back Lahoud, France allied with the U.S. to end Syria's hegemony in Lebanon. Bush and Chirac sponsored Security Council Resolution 1559, calling for free and fair elections for presidency without foreign interferences, withdrawal of external troops from Lebanese territories and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias (indirectly referring to Syria and Hezbollah) (Salloukh, 2009: 166).

Resolution 1559 was accepted on 2 September 2004 and a timetable was prepared for Syria's withdrawal. The main goal of the U.S. and France was to undercut Syria's long-lasting influence in Lebanon. Assad once again miscalculated the external environment by insisting on constitutional amendment for the sake of his ally Lahoud. First, Assad thought that American rhetoric over Lebanon was just for extracting further concessions from Syria on Iraq. Second, Assad did not anticipate France's collaboration with the U.S. since France had long been ally of Syria in Lebanese affairs (Leverett, 2005: 145; Zisser, 2007a: 193-194). Despite criticisms of the U.S. and France against the constitutional amendment, it was passed by the Lebanese parliament with the support of Syria on 3 September, just one day after the passing of Resolution 1559 (Salloukh, 2009, 166). Shortly after the passing of the amendment, a 'made in Syria' cabinet, as explained by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, was announced in Beirut (Salloukh, 2009: 168). Assad once again chose to challenge the U.S. at the expense of escalating the tension between two countries since he thought that Resolution 1559 was prepared for diminishing the role of Syria in Lebanon and forcing it to reconcile with the U.S. in Iraq.

Fatal blow to Syria's position in Lebanon came with the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, who was an ardent opponent of Syria's meddling in Lebanese affairs, in February 2005. Since Assad had personally threatened Hariri before the constitutional amendment in August 2004, accusations of Lebanese political groups and foreign countries were directed against Damascus. Hariri had good relations with Saudi Arabia, France and the U.S. and he was considered as an impediment in front of Syria's interests in Lebanon. Assad immediately rejected the responsibility for assassination and denounced the event. However, Assad's remarks did not calm down the Lebanese public opinion and popular demonstrations were organized by Druze, Sunni and Maronite communities of Lebanon against Syria's presence in their country during February and March of 2005. The U.S. and France quickly handled the assassination in the UN Security Council; meanwhile UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced the establishment of an independent body to investigate the assassination (Lesch, 2005: 126-143; Zisser, 2007a: 195). The UN Independent Investigation Committee publicly accused Assad's brother Maher and brother-in-law Assaf Shawkat of involvement in the assassination (Kandil, 2008: 441; Rubin, 2007: 208-209).

After this development, Assad had to cope with a regional crisis over Lebanon. Growing mass demonstrations against Syria's presence exacerbated pressures on Syria as to fulfilling the terms of Resolution 1559, especially the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. Having seen that there was no way out under severe accusations of both Lebanese public and international community; Assad finally succumbed to pressures and publicly announced the evacuation of Lebanese territories on 5 March 2005. The total evacuation of troops was completed on 26 April 2005, which meant the end of twenty-nine years presence of Syria in Lebanon (Zisser, 2007a: 196). Assad declared that with the total withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, Syria fulfilled the terms of Resolution 1559.

However, the U.S. continued to exert pressure on Syria by claiming that disarmament of Hezbollah was not fulfilled by Damascus (Ziadeh, 2011: 111). Due to neo-cons' preoccupation with regime change in Damascus after Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, Assad ceased to pursue appeasement policy vis-à-vis the U.S. by ending concessions such as intelligence cooperation against terrorism and the Iraqi border (Hinnebusch, 2006b: 138).

Even though Assad was able to defy the U.S. during the invasion of Iraq, he reluctantly agreed to withdraw from Lebanon in 2005. Why did Syria as a weak state choose to comply with the demands of the U.S. during the Lebanon crisis following the Hariri assassination? While the external determinants seem to be more explanatory than internal ones in shaping Syria's decision to retreat, Assad obviously decided to withdraw troops from Lebanese territories to avoid total isolation and international intervention, which would jeopardize the Baath regime's survival. Assad calculated that growing anti-Syrian sentiments in the international community due to Syria's presence in Lebanon would result in an international intervention similar to the Gulf War and ultimately bring about the downfall his regime. Hence, Syria's evacuation of Lebanon was influenced by domestic factors, that is ensuring security and survival of the regime in time of a regional crisis.

With the withdrawal from Lebanon, Syria as a weak state lost its major playground to exert its relational power in the Middle East. Thus, Syria sought to multiply alignments to maintain the security of the regime as well as economic and political survival after the withdrawal. In the wake of Hariri assassination and withdrawal, Syria did not desist from meddling in domestic affairs of Lebanon through Hezbollah to realize its ambitions against the designs of the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia in its immediate neighborhood (Salloukh, 2009: 170-171). In this context, Assad forged alignment with Iran to influence Lebanese affairs against the U.S., Israel, and pro-Western moderate Arab regimes. Assad and Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadinejad visited each other to demonstrate solidarity between the two countries in 2005 and 2006. During his visit to Damascus in January 2006, Ahmadinejad also met with the leaders of Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Lebanese Amal. In June 2006, Syria and Iran concluded a military cooperation agreement, which was an important step in bilateral relations (Lawson, 2007: 40-44). Besides, Syria accelerated economic relations with China due to its deteriorating economic conditions (Kandil, 2008: 435).

Assad was determined to safeguard Lebanon against Western imperialism by strenuously clinging to axis of resistance. He insisted that Lebanon not become a beachhead for a regime change in Damascus. However, Assad's choice of alignment with Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad contradicted Syria's relations with the EU. Thus, the EU suspended the Euro-Mediterranean partnership process with Syria with the backing of the U.S. (Hinnebusch, 2009: 21-22). Furthermore, Syrian-Turkish relations slowed down due to Türkiye's attitude toward Syria regarding UN inspection of Hariri assassination and Türkiye's reenergized relations with Israel during 2005-2006. However, Ankara and Damascus reinvigorated the cooperation starting with the last weeks of 2006. Both countries signed bilateral agreements on economy, energy, free trade, and culture in 2007 and 2008 (Lawson, 2009: 192-197).

After the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, the struggle for the Middle East was began to be fought between the members of the axis of resistance -Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas- and the U.S., Israel, and pro-Western regimes in Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Hinnebusch, 2009: 24). After the 2006 War, the strategic position of Syria in Lebanon thanks to its influence on Hezbollah forced Israel and European countries to reconsider the place of Syria in the Middle East. Especially, the outbreak of a domestic crisis in late 2007, which reached its climax when Hezbollah seized Sunni-dominated West Beirut in May 2008, forced the European countries to think about the importance of Syria in Lebanese affairs. Syria demonstrated its willingness to solve the crisis; thereby European countries began to perceive Syria as a problem-solver rather than troublemaker in Lebanon since Damascus appeared the only force to influence rising Hezbollah in the Lebanese arena. Therefore,

European boycott of Syria was removed, and Syrian politicians were welcomed again in European capitals (Zisser, 2007b: 111-112).

3. Case Three: Syrian Foreign Policy and the Baath Regime's Bloody Arab Spring Experience

After its outbreak in Tunisia in December 2010, the Arab Spring sprang up across the Middle East from Egypt to Bahrain. The overthrown of military dictatorships of Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi through mass demonstrations shook politics of the entire region. Even though Assad seemed confident of his regime's future at the beginning of the uprisings, the wave of change was unavoidable, and it ultimately knocked Syria's door in mid-March 2011. The Baath regime immediately decided to crack down on unarmed civilian protestors who took to streets to call for political reforms, freedom, and democracy. Assad's brutal repression, similar to his father's methods, plunged the country into civil war in the following months. The Arab Spring turned out to be the most serious crisis that endangered the very existence of the ruling Baath regime since 1963. Assad perceived the nation-wide uprising, as a threat to the security and survival of the Baath regime similar to previous two external crises.

The Arab Spring in Syria erupted after a local event in Deraa, a city in southwestern Syria, in mid-March 2011 when a few schoolchildren scrawled anti-regime graffiti on their school's wall. Syrian security forces, extra-sensitive to anti-regime sentiments due to the Arab Spring, promptly arrested children and sent them Damascus where they were reportedly tortured. Upon this event, initial demonstrations broke out in Deraa on 15 March, calling for the release of children and an end to repressive policies of the regime. The security forces brutally responded protests and killed many civilians. Meanwhile, inspired by revolutions in other countries, new demonstrations simultaneously broke out across the country in Hama, Homs, Banias, Latakia, Deir-ez Zor, Qamisli and so on. Civilian protesters demanded an end to corruption and human rights abuses, abolition of emergency law, implementation of promised political reforms, democracy, and freedom. Security forces responded to the protestors deadly and killed dozens of civilians by opening fire on them. In response to growing unrest, Assad announced a series of reforms including the elimination of emergency law and granting citizenship to the Kurds in late March 2011. On 30 March 2011, Assad blamed foreign conspiracies for the ongoing demonstrations rather than admitting mistakes and emphasized stability rather than freedoms in his first speech delivered at the People's Assembly after the outbreak of uprising (Ajami, 2012: 69-109; Lesch, 2012a: 55-86).

Assad's reluctant and artificial reform initiative did not alleviate the unrest and protests popped up across the country in the following months. While the unrest and anti-regime demonstrations continued apace, the army launched massive military operations against civilian protestors, which gave rise to the death toll. In opposition to the regime's violence, some civilian politicians and army officers, rejecting to open fire on civilians, began to defect. In the summer of 2011, Syrian uprising transformed into an armed insurgency with the establishment of Free Syrian Army (FSA) by defected troops under the leadership of Colonel Riad al-Assad to protect civilians against the army assaults ("Syrian Army," 2011). Besides, civilian opposition declared the formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC) after series of meetings in Istanbul on 3 September 2011. SNC was an umbrella organization composed of several opposition groups aiming to overthrow the regime and establish democratic Syria ("Syria's Rebels," 2011). In November 2012, a broad umbrella organization, the so-called the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces including SNC, was formed in Doha, Qatar ("Syria Opposition," 2012).

The Baath regime's security strategy to crack down on the civilian protestors by means of the army, security services and Alawite-dominated paramilitary forces, the so-called *shabiha*, transformed popular demonstrations into massive and grassroots revolution to topple the Baath regime during 2011-2012 (Lesch, 2012a: 103-104). Regime's strategy to suppress the uprising through resorting to military means brought counter-wave of offensives by the FSA forces across the country. In this

context, destructive battles between the security forces loyal to the regime and insurgent military opposition erupted in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Latakia, Deir ez-Zor. When the rebel forces began to capture several towns and villages in northern and eastern Syria, the country was de facto partitioned between the regime and the opposition (Spyer, 2013: 9-11). By June 2012, UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous announced that the Syrian crisis can be defined as a civil war ("Syria in Civil," 2012). According to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in May 2014, 162000 people including civilians, rebel forces, members of the army and other militias have died since the outbreak of the crisis in mid-March 2011 (Surk, 2014).

The civil war in Syria has been mainly shaped by historic Sunni-Shiite sectarian antagonism. "The fact that the government forces cracking down ruthlessly on the protestors in the 2011-2012 uprising were predominantly Alawite only exacerbated sectarian tensions" as expressed by David Lesch (2012a: 106). Similarly, UN Human Rights Council's report released in late 2012 stated that the Syrian conflict became overtly sectarian between the Sunni opposition groups and the heterodox minority communities around the Baathist regime ("UN Says," 2012). While Sunni Salafi extremists of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and al-Qaida linked Jabhat al-Nusra have been backed by the Gulf countries (especially by Qatar and Saudi Arabia) to fight against the regime, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias (backed by Iran) participated in the war to defend the Assad regime, which further aggravated the sectarian nature of the crisis ("The Country," 2013; "Sunni v Shia," 2013).

The unfolding of the Syrian crisis became the most hotly debated issue in the international community. The Baath regime's brutal repression of civilian protestors was condemned by the U.S. and the European Union in the early days of the uprising, and they began to impose economic sanctions on Syria gradually (Lesch, 2012b: 425). Along with them, Türkiye's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was former ally of Assad, cut off relations with Syria due to the regime's oppressive policies and massacres. Then, the U.S., United Kingdom, France, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar formed Friends of the Syrian People Group to actively support the opposition to topple the Baath regime. These countries began to exert pressure on the regime in the international arena as well as provided substantial political, economic, and military aids to the civilian and the military opposition (Lesch, 2012a: 140-163).

Even though the Syrian crisis was domestic in its nature, it later amalgamated with external (regional and international) dynamics, which profoundly affected foreign policy behavior of Syria as a weak state. As mentioned above, Bjøl (1971) has explained that the type and the state of international system precisely affect the behaviors of weak states. It can be argued that the Syrian crisis itself altered the type and the state of the Middle East regional system profoundly. When the Cold War ended, the Middle East regional system became operation field of American hegemony, which manifested itself in the U.S.-led First Gulf War, the war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The ongoing civil war in Syria has converted the type and state of the Middle East regional system into two-tiered confrontation system between the U.S. and Russia as well as among regional states along the Sunni-Shiite sectarian fault lines.

Like the Cold War years, Syria became the battleground of the struggle for the Middle East in the wake of the advent of the Arab Spring. In this milieu, Syria's alignment behavior was characterized by Stephen David's concept of "omnibalancing" (1991) because Assad struggled to balance both internal and external threats to the regime's security and survival owing to his lack of domestic legitimacy. Therefore, foreign policy behavior of Syria as a weak state has been shaped by domestic security concerns of the Baath regime during the crisis. Syria has successfully benefited from the new confrontational system in the region and hinged on regional (axis of resistance) and international (Russia and China) alignments to counter the threats to ensure its survival in the tumultuous years of the Arab Spring.

Assad deployed omnibalancing strategy by aligning with Russia, China and Iran against domestic and external threats while the survival of the regime was endangered by both internal opposition and its external allies. Similar to the attitude of the Friends of the Syrian People Group towards the opposition, these three countries lent political, economic and military support for the Assad regime. Having learned from the case of Libya, Russia and China blocked two UNSC Resolutions proposing the imposition of no-fly zone and sanctions on Syria in October 2011 and February 2012 (Calabrese, 2013: 14-17; Joya, 2012: 35).

Iran especially perceived the survival of Baath regime as existential and thus deployed paramilitary forces to fight along with the Baath regime. Furthermore, Iran-backed Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias (Kataib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq) actively participated in the war and launched joint operations with the Syrian army against the military opposition groups across the country (Barnard & Mourtada, 2013; Funton et al., 2013: 19-26; "Iran and Hezbollah," 2013). Furthermore, attempts at solving the crisis through diplomacy failed miserably. Initiatives of UN-Arab League peace envoy Kofi Annan in Geneva I meeting in June 2012 and of his successor Lakhdar Brahimi in Geneva II meeting in January 2014 to find a political solution to the crisis did not yield any result. By 2014, Assad has appeared to be successful in guaranteeing the regime's survival in Damascus despite the bloody crisis by clinging to his allies albeit loss of authority in substantial parts of the country.

4. Conclusion

Syrian foreign policy has gone through serious crises since Bashar al-Assad's ascent to power in 2000. This article focused on three crises that challenged the Baath regime at the international, regional and domestic levels. These crises were significant because Syria as weak state had to cope with the U.S. as the world's only remaining superpower in the post-Cold War international system. In the article, it is argued that Syria as a weak state, having limited political, economic and power capabilities in the international system, has been able to survive these crises successfully and to prove its agential power through its foreign policy conducts. The article also posited that domestic security and survival concerns shaped Syrian foreign policy in times of crises rather than external determinants.

The article began with elaborating on Syrian foreign policy during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Although President Assad sided with the Bush administration in the global war on terrorism, the relationship between Washington and Damascus deteriorated on the eve of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Assad emerged as a leading critic of invasion in the Arab world and sought to thwart the invasion as much as possible. Syria helped the Iraqi resistance after the invasion by allowing smuggling of arms and fighters into Iraq, which put the U.S. and Syria on a collision course. The Bush administration punished Assad's defiance by signing the SALSA and imposing economic sanctions on Syria. Although Syria made significant concessions in order to prevent the attack of the hegemon, it obviously chose to balance and challenge the U.S. during the invasion of Iraq. In order to avoid isolation in the international system, Assad improved Syria's relations with neighboring countries, especially with Türkiye and Iran. Thus, Syria as a weak state was able to survive an international crisis by pursing an effective alignment policy against pressures of the Bush administration.

The second case upon which the article focused was the Lebanon crisis of 2005. Lebanon entered Syria's orbit in the 1970s and Syria's military intervention in the Lebanon Civil War turned the country into Syria's protectorate. Lebanon was crucial for Syria's strategic objectives as Damascus exerted its relational power in the Middle East through Lebanon. Assad's fatal mistake to back the constitutional amendment extending his ally President Emile Lahoud triggered a regional crisis, in which the U.S. and France got involved. Especially the Bush administration wanted to punish Syria's defiance during the invasion of Iraq in the Lebanese arena. After the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, Syria was forced to withdraw its troops out of Lebanon under pressures of Washington. So, Assad could not balance the U.S. during the Lebanon crisis. Yet, Assad's decision

to evacuate Lebanon was shaped by his determination to protect the regime and maintain its survival. If Assad had defied the U.S. in Lebanon, Syria would have faced invasion like Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991. However, Assad played his cards skillfully by forging Syria's alignment with the axis of resistance -Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas- after the withdrawal and Syria became a key actor in Lebanon within two years.

The article also analyzed Syrian foreign policy during the Arab Spring. Unlike the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Lebanon crisis, the Arab Spring stemmed from domestic environment of Syria. Peaceful demonstrations in March 2011 transformed into an armed revolution owing to the Baath regime's brutal response to the protestors. Domestic crisis in Syria amalgamated with external factors as regional and international actors began to support civilian and military opposition groups. Syria plunged into civil war in a short time and the Baath regime began to lose its control in the country. The Baath regime faced its most serious crisis that threatened its existence during the Arab Spring. President Assad's main motivation again was to maintain survival of the regime during the crisis. For this reason, he adopted omnibalancing strategy to balance internal and external threats against the regime by aligning with other countries. Russia and China helped Syria eschew international sanctions at the UN Security Council. Besides, Iran and Hezbollah supported the Baath regime militarily against the armed opposition in various parts of the country. So, Syria as a weak state has been able to survive the Arab Spring thanks to President Assad's alignment strategy which aimed at ensuring security and survival of the Baath regime.

To sum up, the article has argued that the Baath regime's domestic security and survival concerns have appeared to be the driving force behind foreign policy decisions implemented by President Assad in times of three crises. Thus, Syrian foreign policy decisions under Assad have been shaped by domestic environment rather than external determinants. In this context, the article has put forward that Syria as a weak state is not a victim of external factors, but it has agential power, albeit limited, to shape the trajectory of events via its foreign policy conducts. Thanks to its alignment policy, the Assad regime has been able to cling to power and to weather the storm as of 2023.

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