Foreign Policy in Times of War: The Case of Syria (2011–2021)

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Abstract:
This work examines the impact of the war on the foreign policy of the Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, by dissecting some of the old and new instruments and resources that uphold the regional and international agendas of the Syrian regime, contributing to its survival. The evolution of Damascus' agency, contingent on context, has produced a particular behaviour, which includes the choice of economic, strategic, political, and discursive instruments. The argument is that Syria's external behaviour since 2011 must be apprehended in relation to its statist capabilities as a quasi-state, and to the authoritarian character of its regime. Both structural elements have implications for how we conceive of the foreign policy tools that can be exploited in times of war and occupation.

Keywords: Syria, foreign policy, quasi-state, war, agency-structure debate

Introduction

What has been the impact of the war on the foreign policy and diplomacy of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad? How did the Syrian crisis generate a new imbalance between foreign policy means and ends? How has the Syrian crisis limited the resources available to Damascus, and given rise to the use of new instruments or the different use of old ones, and how do they crystallise around other objectives and agendas? It is to these central questions that this contribution wishes to answer by dissecting some of the old and new foreign policy instruments and resources that uphold the regional and international agendas of the Syrian regime, contributing to its survival.

Countries like Russia, Iran, and Turkey have their troops settled in some parts of Syria's territory, particularly since 2015. However, Syria's agency in foreign policy is not an

altogether irrelevant issue. Studies on the foreign policies of Iraq and Lebanon have asked similar questions in light of the larger literature on "weak states" (Soffar 2010; Salloukh 2008). First, diplomacy and foreign policy continue to play a central role in the maintenance and transformation of power relations inside Syria. Second, the remaining political capital held by Bashar al-Assad after ten years of turmoil, which can be theoretically discussed in relation to the concept of legitimacy (Sottimano 2015), is attached to some extent to the principles guiding Syria's foreign options. Finally, focusing on the external behavior of the Syrian regime provides an "analytical mechanism through which Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations more broadly can account for the influence of context (unique conditions) and contingency (the relationship between context and outcomes)" (Hayes 2018).

The main premise underlying this article is that Syria fits the ideal-type proposed by Chris Alden and Amnon Aran of a quasi-state, which has implications for how we conceive of the foreign policy tools the state can exploit (Alden and Aran 2012: 94). My main argument here is twofold: first, that Syria's foreign policy agency, and its successful (or not) exercise, has depended - or is contingent on - context. Such context (or structure) denotes other domestic and international actors, the relations they entertain and the patterns they have generated. There is constant feedback effect from Syria as an actor to the context, and vice versa (Brighi and Hill 2012). Second, I highlight that the evolutions of such interplay throughout the 2011-21 period have produced a particular foreign policy behavior, which includes the choice of economic, strategic, political, and discursive instruments. On those fields, some similarities and discontinuities can be identified with regards to the first ten years (2000-10) of Bashar al-Assad's rule.

The argument is developed around a brief examination of some instruments at the strategic, economic, and discursive level. Foreign policy instruments are the forms of pressure and influence available to the regime (Baumann and Stengel 2014). The theoretical issues raised by any discussion of foreign policy instruments include the ends-means relationship in foreign policy (Brighi and Hill 2012). The ends are domestic and regional: the former includes maintaining the economic privileges of the regime and its support base; the latter are related to keeping Syria as a façade-state, significant in the Middle Eastern scene and functional for strategic reasons.

After presenting the theoretical elements of the discussion, a brief reminding of Syria's foreign policy during the first ten years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency will be followed by a section devoted to the identification of some non-state actors in the political-diplomatic, economic, rhetorical-symbolic, and military realms since 2011.

Analytical and Methodological Framework

Syria owes its misfortunes to being not a nationless state, but a nation with, at most, a quasi-state. As a quasi-state, Syria possesses juridical statehood, but lacks the institutions able to constrain and outlast the individuals occupying their offices (Alden

and Aran 2012: 92-93). The Baath Party is a hollow shell, while the political system is dominated by the military and security apparatus (Albrecht 2015; Droz-Vincent 2020; Belhadj 2013). In quasi-states, informal domestic arrangements are crucial, because institutional statehood is partial. Not only decisions makers in these states are more exposed to external influences, and more dependent on them, but their aim is to uphold the supportive role of the external environment in maintaining both this quasi-state status and regime's survival. Their available foreign policy tools derive from the strong links and networks forged by the quasi-state's regime with diverse regional and international actors (Alden and Aran 2012: 94, 100).

But this is only part of the story. The reality of the difficulties faced by Syria (for instance not being able to deliver control the totality of its territory, protect all Syrians, create conditions of wealth) refers particularly to the exercise of power within the country.

The relationship that can be established between a certain type of political regime and foreign policy is far from unequivocal, even less so during critical political transitions, which entail a high degree of uncertainty. It has been acknowledged that foreign policy in authoritarian systems is particularly a way to normalise the process whereby oppositional power blocks are excluded, marginalised, and silenced (Weeks & Crunkilton 2017). Foreign policy in nondemocracies can also be particularly effective in the struggle for power, identity, and difference at the domestic level (Yavuz 2022; Jourde 2007).

Despite appearances, the reality of power in al-Assad's Syria belongs, through the military and the secret services, to a "constellation which, within the Alawite community, recruits according to various criteria, function, clientele, alliance, neighbourhood, or even blood ties [...]" (Pierret 2016: 186). As Suhaïl Belhajd's research shows, the centrality of the security apparatus within the Syrian regime is explained by the functional solidarity of the officers who run it, Alawites as well as Sunnis, but also by the extent of its administrative ramifications and its social roots, which are far superior to those of any other Syrian institution (Belhadj 2014). In this way, the Syrian Foreign Ministry as an institution is more of a manager of foreign policy rather than a maker of it. All the important government foreign policy decisions have been effectively made by the President, his family and the *mukhabarat* (secret services). Any decision emanating from a state institution can be bypassed by the intelligence services, which can override any decision-making center (except, perhaps, the Presidency) in a completely arbitrary manner. In situations where individuals in the group have diverged from the inner circle's preferences, they have been excluded, removed from office, or exiled, at best at least, as happened with Former Vice President Abdel Halim Jaddam, who had been in charge of Syrian policy in Lebanon since the 1980s and fled to Paris in 2005; Ghazi Kanaan, Syria's interior minister and a former *strongman* in Lebanon for nearly two decades, who supposedly committed suicide in 2005, or Assef Shaukat, the President's brother-in-law, who was for decades the main *unofficial ambassador* of the regime to European countries before being assassinated in 2012 (Belhadj 2014).[1] Since then,

diplomacy has been represented by General Ali Mamluk.
Accordingly, the political elite has continued to mobilise material and ideational resources of the international and regional systems to serve its own domestic power ambitions. As has been the case with several Arab countries, the persistence of authoritarianism has exacerbated a double security dilemma (Calculli and Legrenzi 2016). This is especially relevant in the case of the Syrian regime and Bashar al-Assad, who belong to the Alawite minority (10-12 per cent of the Syrian population) – although their power base includes other religious groups.

Uneasily Balancing the *Inside* and the *Outside*: Foreign Policy between 2000 and 2010

In order to address the dialectic between the internal and external dimensions of Syria's foreign policy before 2011, two questions must be looked at. The first concerns the paradox of Syrian regional power. Indeed, there was always a dissonance between, on the one hand, the structural economic weakness of Syria and, on the other hand, Syria's remarkable ability, from the 1970s onwards, to show itself as a resolute state on the front lines of the Arab Israeli conflict, that is, as a geopolitical actor capable of consolidating itself in its surroundings as a regional power. The regional power capacities of Syria were illustrated, among other things, by its hegemonic role in Lebanon, the welcoming of Palestinian factions in Syrian territory, the relative autonomy in economic and trade policy, and strategic independence from the US alliance system. Moreover, Syria was one of the few Arab countries to have firmly opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and subsequently sought to obstruct the tasks of US troops. Finally, Damascus went against Franco-American policy in Lebanon from 2004-08.[2] These efforts are also part of the rivalry between Damascus and Riyadh, when on several occasions senior Syrian officials publicly questioned the legitimacy of the Wahhabi kingdom's regional role, and particularly in Lebanon.
Damascus choices since Bashar al-Asad came to power in July 2000 were described by many foreign official ministries and media commentators as irrational and even suicidal, a judgement that underestimated the elements of continuity in relation to the period of his father's reign. Indeed, the steadiness of Damascus's foreign policy was evident in the foreign policy doctrine and agenda, and in foreign policy instruments. Regarding the doctrine, most of the choices are justified in the name of protecting the sovereignty of the Syrian state and the Arab region. Arab nationalism, the dominant identity of the country and ideology of the ruling Baath party, is a direct consequence of Syria's powerful sense of grievance from the history of its formation as a state. There was also a constant preoccupation to secure the economic resources needed for regime survival. Finally, the seemingly immediate goal was the recovery of the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in the 1967 war.
The second question relates to the multiple resources from which Syria drew its power.

Besides the conflict with Israel, the interweaving of the multiple conflict dynamics in the region, the ambiguity and the contradictions of the great powers (the US and France, for instance), but also the weaknesses of neighbouring countries, contributed to Syria's regional role. Such elements offered opportunities to Damascus and provided the regime with a considerable leeway to resort to multiple instruments to maintain its status and its regional role. The steadiness and deepening of its relations with Iran and Russia stood out (Tawil 2010; Terrill 2015). At a rhetorical and symbolic level, the president introduced religious references into his public statements in the hope of mobilising national and transnational support in the face of the re-emergence of Syrian Islamist forces. This tactic was not a novelty, but the consequences of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 raised concerns about the regime being attacked for its Alawite minority character. Thus, Damascus made more concessions to the ulema in educational and associative bodies, intended to appease the clergy and offset support for Lebanese Hezbollah and the deepening of the Damascus-Teheran alliance. These efforts can also be seen as part of the rivalry and verbal escalation with Cairo and Riyadh, particularly during and after the Israeli-Hezbollah war in Lebanon.[3]

Before 2011, faced with the military superiority of its neighbours, the asymmetric tool and support for non-state actors were already being used as an important deterrent value for Syria. Damascus turned to it in handling two fronts with Israel: the Lebanese and the Palestinian, but also the Turkish, the Iraqi after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, by cultivating multiple contacts with Iraqi political forces as well as with Arab and Kurdish groups (Strindberg and Warn 2003). Indeed, asymmetric warfare was best pursued via proxies and requires a military deterrent. In the Palestinian question, and in the framework of acute conflict between Hamas and Fatah, Syria tried to play the role of mediator.[4]

As for economic instruments, since 2004 Damascus' diplomacy was accompanied by the need to build political coalitions for the "social market economy" (Seifan 2011: 4). The Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon, completed at the end of April 2005, pushed the regime to expand economic and banking liberalisation. The priority given to the diversification of trade relations made Turkey and the Arab countries (Iraq in the first place) the main partners of Syria. Bashar al-Assad's regime also sought to exploit its geographic advantage as a transit country for oil and gas pipelines, in cooperation with Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Finally, investments from Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Kuwait were on the rise, which went hand in hand with the regime's objective of bolstering the private sector and offsetting the drop of oil revenues (Hinnebusch 2015). The new contracts and projects in the energy sector greatly benefited the presidential family, the clans and groups that revolve around the regime. The investment of the Gulf countries, strongly associated with real estate speculation, exacerbated the marginalisation of large sections of Syrian society (Balanche 2012). Basically, economic liberalisation remained crossed by the logic of clientelist distribution and corruption. Furthermore,

the regime fostered competition between external actors to obtain resources within Syrian territory, and gave more spaces of sovereignty for third parties to capitalise on the fragility of the Syrian state. Most emblematic examples of this choice were its relations with Arab Gulf countries, Iran, Turkey and Russia (Haddad 2012).
Latin America became another space for Syria's projection and for obtaining mainly political and economic support. During the first decade of his presidency, al-Assad sought to integrate the Syrian diaspora into Syrian affairs not only as a source of economic investment, but also as political capital in the international arena. Additionally, the ministry of expatriates was created in 2002 to foster closer relations with Syrian communities abroad. Shortly after, a Conference of Expatriates was organised in 2004 - it was the first time since 1965 -, and two meetings of the Syrian Expatriate Youth Forum, in 2009 and 2010, were held. Joseph Sweid, the secretary of the SSNP (Syrian Social Nationalist Party), was designated as minister of expatriates in 2008 (Logroño-Narbona 2013). Indeed, thanks to Sweid's work, the community of Syrian expatriates and their descendants in Latin America were more receptive to Bashar al-Assad's visit to the region in 2010. The international context between 2003 and 2015 facilitated greatly these overtures: there was a *new* Latin America, with economic growth, political stability, international autonomy, and an intra-regional coordinated agenda. The economic ascent of China, combined with the reduced political attention from the United States, added favourably to stimulate these changes. These trends offered the framework for the launching in Brasilia, in 2005, of the first Summit of South American-Arab Countries (ASPA) (Brun 2018).
Some senior officials in Syria believed that the pressure against their country from 2001 onwards stemmed from poor image management. Very soon after the start of his presidency, Bashar al-Assad did not hesitate to give multiple interviews to Arab and Western newspapers, visited European capitals, and said he was ready to resume negotiations with Israel. The highlighting of the president's wife, Asma, was part of this management of the image of a progressive, young and secular Syria.
By 2008, the vulnerability of neighbouring countries, as well as the accumulated negative effects of the policies of the United States and Europe, contributed to Syria being once again recognised as a regional actor. One of the public signs of warming relations between Syria and Western countries was President al-Assad's presence at the official Bastille Day military parade on in Paris, in 2008, or the title of Cavaliere dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana (Order of Merit of the Italian Republic) granted in 2010 by the Italian Presidency.
The foreign policy of the Bashar al-Assad regime was thus relatively adept at leading other states to recognise its security interests. Damascus' isolation ended, and yet the recovery of Syrian power was fragile. Foreign policy decisions resulted in meagre socio-economic benefits for the Syrian population (economic diplomacy remained trapped in the interests of the ruling elite, which prevented it from being connected to an

integral development strategy); they did not contribute to strengthening the social fabric or national unity. At a structural, external, level, the regional divisions affecting Middle Eastern politics during the 2000s were of a different nature. The Lebanese crisis, the strengthening of the alliance with Iran and the continued manipulation of the Palestinian issue raised critical voices. One of the most illustrative examples in this regard was "The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change", published by a coalition of internal and exiles opposition groups on October 18, 2005, addressing the sensitive issue of Lebanon, and demanding political solutions. Several similar petitions followed in 2006 and 2007. Certainly, the crisis with Lebanon is one of the failure stories of Syrian diplomacy that highlighted the regime's internal divisions.
Only a few weeks before the beginning of the Syrian uprising, President Bashar al-Assad famously predicted that Syria would be spared of the popular unrest seen elsewhere in the Arab world because its foreign policy was more aligned with the popular will than were the pro-American stances of Tunisia and Egypt.[5] However, the outbreak of the popular uprising in Syria in March 2011 starkly exposed the growing lack of congruence between the objectives associated with internal stability and the foreign policy ambitions of the regime. The demonstrators did not speak of Arab ideology; the fact that references to notions such as the "Arab homeland" were absent from the slogans of opponents and activists reflects their conviction that for there to be *true Arabs* there must first be *true Syrian citizens*.

Old and New Trends after 2011

Syria's army reacted to the popular uprising with uncompromising physical violence by the security forces which opened fire on demonstrators; yet protests continued and spread beyond initial demonstrations in the southern city of Dera'a to the Sunni heartland around Homs, Hama, Deir al-Zor and Aleppo. The defection of a number of low-ranking officers resulted in the establishment of the Free Syrian Army. In the course of the regime's military initiative in spring 2012 and the rebel attacks in Damascus and Aleppo in the summer of that same year, Syria slipped into civil war, with the rebels strengthened by international support and the regime's forces losing control over large swaths of the country's territory. Against the framework of Western hesitations and divisions, the assertiveness of Russia (and China), along with the ineffectiveness of regional and international organizations, Damascus showed different degrees of agency by resorting to material and rhetorical instruments, relying differently on them. In the strategic (military) field, the increased capability of major rebel formations and the consequent battlefield ineffectiveness of the Syrian army prompted the expansion of local security forces and import of foreign actors. The overlap between domestic and foreign politics exacerbated Syria's permeability to regional pressures and its vulnerability to external intervention. That the al-Assad regime compromised the sovereignty of the state and its foreign policy independence by allying with non-state actors as leverage

cards was not a novelty; this choice has been part and parcel of "the norms and commitments of Bashar al-Assad's nationalist mission for some time" (Sottimano 2015: 84). So, Iranian military advisers were followed in 2012 by Shia fighters sent to support the regime's forces. The first arrivals were from Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Mercenaries followed from 2013 onwards, including fighters from the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) militias in Iraq. Iran continued to boost the numbers of Shia militias in Syria, later sending personnel from Afghanistan, Yemen, and Pakistan to fight for the regime. Along with those foreign militias, there are local, Christian, forces on which Russia has been relying (Gani 2015). Even the Islamic State (Daesh) was indirectly useful for Damascus in so far as they both shared the objective of weakening the insurgent forces by fueling their internal divisions. Thus, for instance, when the Syrian oil wells fell under the control of Daesh and the transnational jihadist group proclaimed the caliphate in 2014, depriving the Syrian regime of a major source of income and energy, Syria's business elite played the role of intermediary, buying oil from Daesh (Khatib and Sinjab 2018: 17). This evolution points more generally to the economic non-state actors associated with the Syrian regime: the rise and growth of economic intermediaries - more ambitious and influential than regular regime cronies - has been facilitated by several reasons (Khatib and Sinjab 2018: 17-18) and have been involved in funding pro-regime militias and military divisions or using their media platforms to spread the regime's narrative and propaganda to the outside world. Some illustrative examples include new rich unknown (or almost unknown) before 2011,[6] like Samer Foz, who played an important intermediary role, especially in the buying and selling of wheat with Russia. Another important player is George Haswani, who not only has strong relations with security agencies, particularly Air Force Intelligence, and good connections with Russian companies and influential persons in Russia (Mehchy, Haid and Khatib 2020). Haswani is said to have facilitated the purchase of oil from Daesh on behalf of the Syrian government. According to some sources, he was also negotiating contracts between the jihadist organization and the regime, also operating a natural gas installation in Tabqa, in the province of Raqqa, jointly managed by Damascus and Daesh (Khatib and Sinjab 2018). Haswani's functions have not been limited to the economic sphere. It is said that he facilitated, in March 2014, the release of thirteen Greek Orthodox nuns, who had been kidnapped by the Front al-Nosra (Syrian branch of al-Qaëda, at least up to 2016).[7] Another example is Mohammad Hamcho, who appears to be midway between the regime and China in the framework of negotiations about investment opportunities for reconstruction. Indeed, the regime's attitude towards external actors has to do, since 2017, with the government policy on reconstruction.[8] The aim is to use the latter to lock in wider international reintegration, not only to secure economic assistance but also to put the seal of legitimacy on his military victory (Barnes-Dacey 2019). Besides, the reconstruction process has been linked to a wider and deeper application of neoliberalism (Daher 2019: 40-41).[9] In the same token, Daesh has

also been useful for the regime's negotiation strategy, as it turned it into a commodity or currency of exchange in negotiations with the United Nations and external powers.[10] The release, by the Syrian regime, of Islamic extremists to subvert the uprising can be seen as part and parcel of this kind of strategy.[11]
Towards Latin-America, some characteristics in Syria's orientation continued. Al-Assad saw those regional states both as a source of economic investment and as political capital in the international arena. Accordingly, with the transformation of the uprising into an armed conflict, the majority of the Arab and Syrian Lebanese traditional institutions became more vocal in expressing their support for the Syrian regime, usually referring to it as "progressive", "secular" and "the legitimate representative of the Syrian people" (Baeza 2013: 34-35). According to Cecilia Baeza, "several Latin American newspapers covered the unofficial visit of Bouthaina Shabaan, a close advisor of al-Assad and former minister of Syrian expatriates, to Argentina and Brazil, where she met with prominent businesspeople of Syrian origin, most probably to gather funds for the regime" (Baeza 2013: 34). Members of the government would thus have received different kinds of material gathered by diaspora organisations. Concerning Latin-American decision makers and diplomats, the way they frame and interpret the Syrian conflict has been informed to some extent by high-level and personal connections with some members of the Syrian diaspora (Baeza and Pinto 2016). The connections between the Latin-American political culture and the ideological framework of the pro-regime diasporic mobilisation are without doubt a crucial element in explaining these outcomes. The propaganda linked to the notion of anti-imperialism and to what the al-Assad regime also claims as "resistance to the Israeli occupation" resonates in nationalist and Arab left-wing circles (Baeza and Pinto 2016: 343; Herrera 2013) and North Africa (Dot-Pouillard 2012).
This kind of instrumentalisation has a counterpart inside Syria, with the creation of discursive arenas articulating personal and collective experiences and identities with the larger political and sectarian framework. For instance, Syrian Christian voices have sided with the Syrian regime, particularly top-ranked religious leaders, from the beginning of the uprising. One example is Father Ilyas Zahlawi, a Catholic priest, founder of the Choir of Joy (1977). Bashar al-Assad supported the Choir before 2011 as part of his new approach to emphasise tolerance of the regime towards religious minorities, particularly the Christians. After 2011, the Choir organised concerts in Syria and in different European countries during which it insisted on its support for the Syrian regime as the protector of the Christian minority in Syria. On 23 June 2011, Zahlaoui addressed a letter to Alain Juppé, then the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, criticizing Paris' "interference". In 2017, he gave a speech to the European Parliament, in which he questioned the legitimacy of the war with Syria, in addition to mentioning the hidden political and economic interests.[12] For his part, in January 2012 the Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo, Jean-Clement Jeanbart, told his followers that "Assad must be

given a chance," calling him "a loyal and sincere man".[13] Other examples show the instrumentalisation of identity in the "dialogues in Arab politics" (Barnett 1998). For example, in his appearance before the Human Rights Commission, the Permanent Representative of Syria to the United Nations, Bashar Jaafari, described as "lackeys of the West" the Arab countries that signed the drafts for peace negotiations between the regime and the Syrian opposition forces. He also alluded to Syria's progressive stature in contrast to the Arab Gulf conservatism by signaling that: "In Syria since 1918 women can vote, they can drive cars, they can be doctors. We have a Parliament".[14] In the same token, the Syrian Parliament recognized the Armenian genocide of 1915, amid deep tensions with Turkey in north-western Syria (February 2020). In the Palestinian issue, during May 2021, and during the Israel's war against the Gaza Strip, al-Assad hosted in Damascus a delegation of leaders of Palestinian factions. During the meeting, the Syrian president stressed his country's firm position on the Palestinian cause.
In terms of technology and communication, the Syrian regime has consolidated several new media fronts. Instagram, television series, hackers from the Syrian Electronic Army and the President's field visits are the instruments of propaganda. The war also created a new Middle Eastern media in Spanish. For example, HispanTV, a Spanish-language news channel operated by IRIB, Iran's state-owned media corporation, began broadcasting in December 2011.[15] Similarly, the Spanish version of SANA (the official Syrian news agency) opened a Facebook page in May 2013.[16] Among the Shi'i sources in Spanish, the main ones are the Spanish version of Hezbollah-owned Al-Manar, the first to be launched in early 2010;[17] Annur TV, "the first Arab and Islamic channel from Argentina," on the air since December 2010.[18] In several media encounters, al-Assad repeated his longstanding assertions that the uprising against him was driven by "murderous criminals" and terrorists financed by rivals such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with American blessing.[19] In addition, more recently the regime leaks news staging Damascus' independence towards Iran, at a time when al-Assad is trying to position himself as a regional player.[20]
The above examples do not necessarily reflect that the Syrian regime is in control. For instance, while Hezbollah fought alongside the regime and helped save it, opinions differ within the group as to the need to once again allow it to exercise influence on this side of the border. Some believe that it is now up to Hezbollah to play this role of supreme arbiter, a situation that can actually be traced since the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's presidency.[21] The balance has seemingly changed also in favour of Palestinian Hamas. The Israeli war in Gaza of May 2021 pushed Syria to take a step back instead of refusing to deal with Hamas, and there have even been some potential moves to repair relations between Hamas and the Syrian regime. But if Damascus is accepting the movement's return to its soil,[22] dissenting pro-Hamas Palestinian and Arab stances may block the return.
In addition, the ability of the Syrian regime to mobilize support outside the Middle East

has been severely constrained in the past ten years. For instance, around 2013 new governments took office in various Latin American countries which sought to discard the previous tendencies, by defining foreign policies that make explicit ideological affinities with the United States. These centripetal forces affected links with the Middle East, as demonstrated by the abandonment of the ASPA forum of dialogue. Another illustration of this turn was Buenos Aires' decision, in 2019, to designate the Lebanese political group and militia Hezbollah as an Iran-backed terrorist group, and pointed to its presence in the so-called Tri-Border area of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay (Tawil and Brun 2022).

At the domestic level, one of the general ways in which the ends and means relationship is implicated in foreign policy implementation is in the form of consensus needed to sustain foreign policy objectives (Brighi and Hill 2012: 155). When a modicum of consensus is missing, foreign policy is undermined from below. From this perspective, it is hard to know what Syrians want for their country's international relations; the study of Syrian public opinion is in its infancy. However, among the credible efforts made so far, some offer a hint of certain patterns within the Syrian population in terms of opinion and perceptions (Abd El Rahman 2017; Corstange 2019; Corstange and York, 2018).[23] More generally, on the basis of those findings and empirical insights,[24] it is clear that many conventional narratives of the conflict are oversimplifications of a more complex reality; also, that Arab nationalism and the defense of Palestine as guiding principles of Damascus' foreign policy doctrine have long been discredited in the eyes of the majority, because the gap between those principles, on the one hand, and the decisions taken, on the other, continued to grow inexorably. So, it came as no surprise that Syrian businessman Rami Majluf's, in a statement to the *New York Times*, linked Israel's security directly to the continued power in Syria of its cousin Bashar al-Assad;[25] neither was it a wonder when the Syrian regime remained silent over the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain's move to normalize relations with Israel in September 2020. Finally, uncertainty from inside Syria is also produced both by a divided opposition (Alsarraj and Hoffman 2020) and by Syrians reportedly casting doubts on their national sentiments and identity in some parts of the country, particularly the northeast (Dacrema and Talbot 2019).

Syria and the External Environment: A Not Too New Entwining

The brief landscape presented above shows both, a differentiated access to conventional and non-conventional foreign policy tools by the Syrian regime, and the continued effects of foreign policy on informal domestic arrangements in Syria as a quasi-state. One of the characteristics of quasi-states as defined by Chris Alden and Amnon Aran (2012) is their vulnerability to external events. In this respect, an empirical examination must consider the weaknesses of neighbours, the contradictions of foreign powers' choices, and geopolitical continuities. Among the latter, those that remain in place

after 2011 include Palestine, resource disputes such as oil and water supply, Lebanon and Israel, rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, jihadism. Lebanon, because of the fragility of its own balance, refrains from criticising and sanctioning Damascus in regional and multilateral fora. Lebanon's weakening of state institutions and the strong polarisation,[26] as well as the presence of around 1.5 million Syrian refugees on Lebanese soil have created a perfect ground for the Damascus regime to reinsert itself into Lebanese affairs. Furthermore, in December 2018, Abu Dhabi reopened its embassy in Damascus - followed shortly after by Bahrain. Then, in March 2022 Bashar al-Assad visited the United Arab Emirates, his first official trip to an Arab country since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. The Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir was the first Arab head of state to meet with his Syrian counterpart since the start of the war. From there, other countries, such as Egypt, Oman, Iraq or Jordan, gradually relaxed their positions vis-à-vis Damascus (but without going so far as to reopen their embassies). In Lebanon, Iraq, or even Jordan, economic crises favour cooperation - not because Syria would be a promising economic partner, but because the country remains a neighbour with a central position and controlling transit roads.
As for the United States, the Obama administration focused on providing humanitarian aid, and on promoting a ceasefire and political negotiations aimed at al-Assad's departure. In the spring and summer of 2013, chemical weapons were used against Syrian civilians. On 27 September 2013 the UN Security Council adopted the binding resolution 2118, which proposed that the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons eliminated the arsenal of chemical weapons in possession of the Syrian state. The accord implicitly reinstated Syria as a partner of the international community, it did not contain a condition to resort directly to the use of force in the event of its breach, nor did it limit or punish the use of conventional weapons which continued to kill dozens of civilians daily in cities and towns.[27] Later, the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014 completely diverted the attention of the United States away from the Syrian regime's behaviour.
Taking advantage of the margin left by the uncoordinated international response, the Syrian president hosted journalists and emissaries of all kinds to explain his position. For instance, during the crisis generated by the attack on civilians with chemical weapons in 2013, CBS, Rossiya 24 TV, Fox News, CCTV, TeleSUR, Rai News 24, Halk TV, and *Der Spiegel* interviewed the Syrian president. Al-Assad increasingly set out to recall that the decision of Damascus to eliminate the chemical weapons arsenal in line with the Russian-American accord (Geneva, 14 September 2013), but dated back to 2003 when Syria demanded at the UN that the Middle East got rid of its weapons of mass destruction, including Israel.[28]
During President Donald Trump's administration, the main method has been the

strangling of the Syrian economy.[29] American sanctions policy vis-à-vis Damascus has generally remained inflexible under President Joe Biden (since January 2021); however, his administration relaxed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (17 June 2020), which expanded the authority of the U.S. government "to sanction businesses, individuals, and government institutions for economic activities that support the Assad regime's ability to wage war".[30] It did so by overlooking Iranian oil tankers entering the Syrian port of Tartus and the flow of Egyptian gas and Jordanian electricity to Lebanon via Syria.[31] Additionally, the US Treasury Department announced that it had amended the Syrian Sanctions Regulations, allowing NGOs operating on the ground to make new investments in the country and to conduct transactions with parts of the government.[32] As for the European Union, it has been facing divisions over the potential reintegration of Syria. General Ali Mamluk's missions to several countries, including Italy, Jordan, Egypt, Russia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have sought to break the isolation of the regime and begin its diplomatic normalisation.[33] Mamluk has focused its efforts on issues of elite and national consensus: above all, negotiating with the UN and the Arab League to restore the country's legal sovereignty, and bring about an end to the international sanctions. International organisations have also had a more conciliatory attitude towards the al-Assad regime. Two illustrative examples are Syria being appointed to the World Health Organization's Executive Board (June 2021), and the lifting of restrictions by the Interpol (October 2021).

In the asymmetrical relationship with Iran and especially with Russia, the Syrian President reportedly would retain a certain degree of action.[34] For instance, not the entire military-security apparatus is in the hands of Russia or Iran: Bashar al-Assad would still have control over military intelligence (which has always been at the heart of the Syrian military-security apparatus). This is where the appointments of officers of the Syrian army are decided in particular. So, for example, the spread of Russian military influence seemingly caused more concerns within the Syrian regime, which feared the possibility of Russia concluding any deal that would make significant changes in the army and security system, or Russia contemplating a compromise on the regime, whether at the regional or international level.[35] Al-Assad would retain a certain power of nuisance to stand up to Moscow, by reminding the Kremlin also that it remains essential to bring up information gathered by its intelligence services, and which are crucial for the security of Russian troops in Syria.[36] The rivalry between Turkey and Russia - at least up until Russia began its military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 - seemingly gave Damascus a similar margin. For its part, China, which has been also capitalising on Washington's strategic blunders and filling vacuums in the volatile region, sees in the growth of its partnership with Damascus an asset for Beijing's economic influence in West Asia.[37]

At the domestic level, the present and future uses of the Arab nationalist card is a

way of interrogating how domestic and foreign politics overlap in a state lacking national consensus on a range of strategic issues. Survey evidence from diverse samples of Syrian refugees in neighbouring Lebanon, and of Syrians inside Syria, show that Syrians oppose the partitioning of their territory, and that self-identifying as a Syrian is a preferred option to identifying as a Sunni or a Shia (Abd El Rahman 2017; Corstange 2019; Corstange and York 2018);[38] thus, the majority of Syrian political forces do not propose an alternative territorial framework for the realisation of their political ambitions the sentence below, in the following rephrasing: as Thomas Pierret (2016) argues, the very real sectarian polarisation between Sunnis and Alawis has not necessarily resulted in the emergence of competing national projects, but rather in the emergence of divergent conceptualisations of the same nation. This remains true despite the influence of international mediation efforts in shaping the identities of Syrian conflict parties (Clowry 2022).

In sum, the political context (i.e. the constraints placed on policymakers by domestic politics and the authoritarian nature of the regime) and social structures (as Arabist and other narratives, and their acceptability, show) play an important role in foreign policy decisions in times of war and occupation. The institutional, normative and legal frameworks of the internaitonal system grant the Syrian regime access to different types of tools. Cognitive considerations - for instance, learning and analogical reasoning by the leadership - can also account for the influence of context and contingency. Bashar al-Assad and his regime have developed hubris and overconfidence, over time becoming more experienced, and have had opportunities to learn from prior domestic and international politics and expectations. This illustrates how learning might reinforce current beliefs of decision-makers, and therefore inhibit policy change (Levy 1994). Equally important, analogical reasoning by the Syrian leadership could prescribe commonsense interpretations of the past. These and other cognitive approaches sit at the heart of the conceptual and practical link between leadership and foreign policy (Kaarbo 2021).

Conclusions

The preliminary analysis presented in this text allows to dissect some of the effects that informal and formal domestic political arrangements in Syria as a quasi-state can have on foreign policy decision-making, and on the use of foreign policy instruments (Cf. Alden and Aran 2012: 93) in times of war and/or occupation. In the framework of a constant feedback between Syria and its domestic and international context, new and old imbalances between means and ends have led to a particular foreign policy behavior since 2011. The latter shows both continuities and adjustments in terms of the resources available and of the use of foreign policy instruments.

Damascus' behaviour since the March 2011 uprising displays at least four main realities. First, Syria as a quasi-state, understood in ideal-typical terms, has implications for

how foreign policy analysis conceives of the relationship between state, society, and foreign policy. Second, Syrian foreign policy has always been constrained by the existence of other actors and the intractability of the system as a whole. This reality represents the cutting edge for theoretical and analytical efforts to understand the relationship between structure and agency in international outcomes. It also points to the manifestation of the characteristics of Syria's agency as the basis for explaining outcomes before and after 2011. Among the characteristics briefly recalled here, there were state/regime motives and informal decision-making processes. Third, in the past ten years there has been a continuing widening gap between the objectives associated with internal stability and those with reinstating Syria as a *lawful* member of the international community. Fourth, foreign policy being a critical asset for the Syrian regime, Damascus strives to retain some, although very limited, capacity to manage its external relations. Indeed, the profoundly authoritarian character of the regime allows to account for certain orientations (reshaping alliances or coalitions with statist and non-state actors, etc.), as well as for the use of specific instruments (discursive strategies, reaching to new actors, signing of agreements, etc.).
Some of the accounts explored here can lead to new inquiries. One relates to the parallel diplomacy carried out by armed and non-armed non-state actors, Syrian and foreign. This distinction has important theoretical implications, for instance it puts into perspective the hypothesis of a deficiency of sovereignty in the field of diplomacy. Second, the complexity of the foreign policy landscape will be compounded by the rise and legal institutionalisation of Kurds and its implementation of a *de facto* independent foreign policy, which not only furthers the Kurds' claims to complete autonomy, but is also, at times, contrary to the foreign policy aims of the central government in Damascus. Third, the extent the relative erosion of Arab Baathist ideology as a source of identity has shifted power to non-state groups and given them significant leverage over the regime's state and foreign policy agenda. As Kristina Kausch (2017: 82) argues "non-state actors can also be seen as bearers of alternative identities to be deployed, affirmed and defended in relations with the outside world." Finally, the Syrian case invites to a comparative study of how, in deeply divided societies like today's Syria, foreign relations and foreign policy are often pursued by state or non-state actors to strengthen their political positions in domestic politics.

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Notes:

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4 - S. Hersh, *Syria Calling*, "The New Yorker", 29 March 2009.

5 - International Crisis Group (ICG) (2011), *Popular Protest in North Africa And The Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution Middle East*, in "North Africa Report", n.108 https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/popular-protest-north-africa-and-middle-east-vi-syrian-people-s-slow-motion-revolution (last accessed 20 October 2021)

6 - P. Halabi, *Ces huit hommes d'affaires qui se partagent le gâteau syrien, Enquête sur les nababs montants ou sur le déclin et comment le régime les fait et défait*, "L'Orient-Le Jour", 5 October 2019.

7 - *These three Syrian businessmen allegedly involved in the shipment of ammonium nitrate*, "World Today", 16 January 2021.

8 - See G. Cafiero, *China plays the long game on Syria*, "Middle East Institute", 10 February 2020. In a December 2019 interview, Bashar al-Assad said that the Chinese were assisting with reconstruction and humanitarian aid (including water, electricity, and the like). He also expressed hope that Chinese firms can start looking and studying the Syrian market, which is improving quickly and constantly in terms of security. The Syrian president claimed that officials in Damascus are in talks with Chinese companies about figuring out ways to evade sanctions and improve access to markets in Syria.

9 - In July 2015, the government approved a law allowing city councils and other local government bodies to set up private companies to manage public assets and services. This opened the way for the regime's cronies to generate business from such assets. In February 2016 the Syrian government announced a new economic strategy, the so-called "National Partnership", replacing the social market model of the economy which had existed before the uprising of March 2011. The related Public Private Partnership Act was passed in January 2016, authorising the private sector to manage and develop state assets in all sectors of the economy except oil. The government's approach to reconstruction has been similar: private entities are given the leading roles.

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17 - https://spanish.almanar.com.lb/ (last accessed on 5 February 2022).

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20 - Stéphanie Khoury, *Assad est-il de retour dans le jeu régional?*, "L'Orient-Le Jour", 7 September 2021.
21 - E. El-Hokayem, *Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship*, "The Washington Quarterly", 2007.
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