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## **Dynamics of Syria and European Union Relations under Bashar al-Assad**

Amit Kumar Singh<sup>1\*</sup> and Akanksha Gupta<sup>2</sup>

1 Assistant Professor , Post Graduate Department of History, Dev Samaj College for Women. Ferozepur, Punjab.

2 Research Scholar , School of West Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

\*Corresponding Author: Amit Kumar Singh

### **Abstract**

In the current circumstance international relations are becoming much more important towards achieving the goal of sustainable growth and development of nations. Syria- European Union relations have always been highly dynamic and it became highly crucial when Bashar al-Assad came into power. The new successor of Syria was brought up in Europe (London) primarily. The world believed that the new President is Syrian by birth & in blood, but Britisher in work, culture & class. , thus it was anticipated that Syria- European Union bilateral is bound to go through huge transitions. Relations with European Union are very much important for Syria at the time of Bashar succession because, Syria was facing International isolation and many conflicts inside and outside simultaneously. The United States (US) has assimilated a different policy for West Asian Countries and became very much visible since Israel establishment. Hence, Bashar made central tenets of Syria's foreign policy to build a strong relationship with the European Union (EU). The present work is an attempt to analyse Syria and European Union relation during 2000-2010. It was instituted their relations mainly guided by economic benefits and political cooperation with EU member countries.

**Key Words:** Syria-EU relation, Basar al-Asad , West Asia, Israel

### **Introduction**

Hinnebusch mentioned in his work that, “a major alteration in Syria's policy under Bashar was the strategic priority given to relations with Europe”. There are some important reasons for Syria's rapprochement with the European Union First a closer link with the EU will give economic benefits to the changing economy of Syria because the EU has built its external policies on constructive engagement with countries in the region, as well as providing economic aid and technical assistance to create a free trade area in the Mediterranean region. By this policy Syria tried to strengthen the economic, technical and constructive engagement by signing the Association Agreement with EU. Syria strongly believed that the EU could be an important mediator to normalize relations with the US and the strategic reorientation with the EU became a part of the more usual act of re-balance theory. Even, the EU demanded much from Syria in the name of Association Agreement negotiation and Syria fulfilled all the demands and withdrew from Lebanon. A significant transition was marked when Bashar al- Assad came into power after his father, Hafez al- Assad's death in 2000. And, more importantly, it represented a new hope that Syria would truly liberalize its political system, modernizes its economy and the new era of social-politico drift will begin. Such hopes were primarily based on his young age and likely impact of his education with Western imprints.<sup>1</sup> Among the Syrians, there were apprehensions about nation's political, economy, and cultural openness and after regime change<sup>2</sup> apprehensions were translated to expectations. Bashar started sounding as a true reformer since Syria's economy and political system were perforated with countless problems then. Newton's third law can't be an exception here. Eventually, many resisting forces came into existence and

<sup>1</sup> Leverett , Flynt, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press; 2005

<sup>2</sup> Perthes , *Syria under Bashar al-Assad: Modernisation and the Limits of change*. UK: Routledge; 2004

complicated Bashar' new initiative of total liberalization covering socio-political aspects as well. This apprehended Bashar and he became indecisive toward all such change. This series of change and no change sequence was very crucial for relation dynamics within the Syrian national boundaries. As a consequence, his turnaround on political liberalization in the middle of his first year showed that while economic reform may be forthcoming in Syria, the new regime is reluctant to take a path of political reform. However, at this critical juncture Bashar was indeed aware of bridging the deep gulf between Syrian and Western Society also.

### **Geographical uniqueness of Syria**

It would not be metamorphic if we say Syria is located at the very heart of the West Asia, enjoying exceptional geographic importance. Geography determines both threats and the opportunities and hence Syria is very often confronted in its external environment. Syria has got certain other limitations like potential of National Power (Syria has a relatively sizeable population with a limited manpower base) and little strategic depth or deterrence to invasion. Syrian decision makers knew that Syria's limited natural and economic resources were too slim to support their policy ambitions and thus external assistances were inevitable. The geopolitical condition of Syria opened so many doors and declares it as an absolute power in the Levant<sup>3</sup>. The same geopolitical situation made Syria and Israel natural competitors for the Levant. But on the other hand, Syria's geographical position was highly vulnerable to external pressures, being unprotected by natural boundaries and bare on all sides to countries which, one time or another, have constituted threats like Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and biggest threat by Israel.

### **Beginning of EU Relationship& Grounds for its Building**

At the time, when Bashar acceding power, Syria has had to deal with a number of International and domestic crises that have put the stability of his regime to the test and in this situation Syria has to not only to survive but also has grown its political importance and made it stable, dominant and key player in the region. The United States (US) acquired different policy for west Asian countries since Israel establishment. Hence, Bashar made central tenets of Syria's foreign policy to build a strong relationship with the European Union (EU). According to Hinnebusch, "a major alteration in Syria's policy under Bashar was the strategic priority given to relations with Europe"<sup>4</sup>. There are some important reasons for Syria's rapprochement with the European Union First a closer link with the EU will give economic benefits to a changing economy of Syria because the European Union has built its external policies on constructive engagement with countries in the region,<sup>5</sup> as well as providing economic aid and technical assistance to create a free trade area in the Mediterranean region. By this policy Syria tried to strengthen the economic, technical and constructive engagement by signing the Association Agreement with European Union. This has taken place without any sort of relevant political pressure on associated countries connected to the EU to deliver on genuine reforms. Syria was facing many sanctions imposed by International Organizations and US and hence the Syrian economy needed to be restructured to support of the EU.

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<sup>3</sup> Perthes, Volker, Syria under Bashar al-Assad: Modernisation and the Limits of change, London: Oxford University Press; 2004

<sup>4</sup> Hinnebusch, Raymond, Syrian Foreign Policy between regional conflict and European Partnership, The Review of International Affairs, 2003: 3(1) ; 3

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

### **Syria-EU-US Relation Dynamics**

Initially constructive relations with European Union provided the Syrian regime with the necessary legitimacy to become fully accepted among the community of nations, despite its antagonistic attitude on regional affairs. Syria strongly believed that the EU could be an important mediator to normalize relations with the US which deteriorated after objection against the Iraq war and its relations with Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran<sup>6</sup>. And, hence the strategic reorientation with the EU became a part of the more usual act of re-balance. Above reasons for Syria's inclination towards the EU was perceived as the weakest of Syrian position and as the country was in need of economic aid in the form of investment, technical assistance and strategic assets it could invest in its very tense relationship with the US. The EU took full advantage of Syria's weaknesses and necessity to push for an Association Agreement and put strict provisions, including military ones and everything went well, what the EU had demanded to other associated countries in the West Asia region<sup>7</sup>. It seemed clear that the EU, while stopping short of advocating regime change in Syria, certainly aimed to bring the regime not only within the Mediterranean free trade area in which the EU is dominated by forcing Bashar to accelerate the speed of market reforms, but also to make Syria accept a new world order in the region. This meant withdrawal from Lebanon, unilateral arms reductions, reviewing ties with Islamist non-state actors and acting as a mediator against Iran issues. In exchange the EU would sign an Association Agreement, which would bring economic benefits and worked as a catalyst between Syria and the US and 'put in a good word' for both the nations.

### **Potential of Syria-EU Relations**

Syria and EU relations are very often hyphenated as Syria–EU relations. This highlights the seriousness and embedded relationship. The EU strategy was an innovation in terms of its regional policies in so far as it demanded much of Syria and for a time this strategy seemed to work with the EU is going as far as freezing the Association Agreement negotiations over the assassination of Rafik Hariri. Even though, Syrian representatives were called for the continuation of negotiations. At the time the EU strategy seemed to work as Syria accelerated domestic economic reforms in order to be seen as a reliable partner for the EU, at time when the US was putting pressure on Syria by strengthening of economic sanctions and constraints<sup>8</sup>. Syria also fulfilled with the demands of the international community and withdrawn Syrian troops from Lebanon, which France saw as a condition *sine qua non* for unfreezing the negotiations on the Association Agreement. However, the regional situation began to change quite dramatically and Syria benefited from this. A number of factors contributed to strengthen the Syrian regime and foreign policy positions e.g. the US became bogged down in Iraq and the fears that Syria could be next were assuaged. It had become very clear that democracy by invasion was not a successful strategy for the international community to pursue. Also, the absence of Syrian troops in Lebanon was perceived as the reason that led to the *Tammuz* (July) war and to renewed fighting between the different Lebanese factions<sup>9</sup>. Further, it became obvious again that without Syria there can be no successful peace process in the region. And finally, the war in Gaza confirmed once again that there was indeed a solid constituency across the Arab world for the politics of resistance that Syria has openly subscribed to from a very long period. This led to a significant

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<sup>6</sup> Salloukh, Bassel, Demystifying Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Assad, in F. Lawson (eds) Demystifying Syria, London: Saqi Books, 2009. P 149

<sup>7</sup> Zorob, Anja, The Syrian-European Association Agreement and its Potential Impact on Enhancing the Credibility of Reform, Mediterranean Politics, 2008: 13(1)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Mohns, Erik and Cavatorta, Francesco, Yes, he can, A reappraisal of Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad, Mediterranean Politics, 2010; 15(2).

turnaround in Syria's international fortunes and it forced western diplomats and thinkers that Syria was an indispensable country in the regional affairs<sup>10</sup>. Thus, in July 2008, at the Paris meeting<sup>11</sup> held to launch the Union for the Mediterranean (UM), the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was probably the most important guest invited. President Sarkozy had invited Bashar not only to attend the meeting on the UM, but to participate in celebrations of the France. This was the most potent signal to date that Syria's crucial role in the West Asia was beginning to be acknowledged in the European region. After this, Syria has been considered as a dominant player on the International scenario, again<sup>12</sup>.

### **Effects & Affects of Syria-EU Dynamics**

The implications of this turnaround for Syria-EU relations have been revealing of both the nature of the Syrian regime and EU's external policy making. The EU, a much more realist actor than is usually recognized<sup>13</sup>, attempted to take advantage of Syria's perceived weakening position in order to extract significant economic and political concessions, although it did not go as far as pushing for or advocating regime change. The EU 'played tough' *vis à vis* Syria with the specific intent of accelerating economic reforms compatible with the neo-liberalism that characterizes the Union's commercial relations with third world countries. However, the EU 'played tough' for too long and it was in some ways blindsided by its own member states, which were more attentive to the changing regional situation and accommodated to some extent, Syria demands or at the very least recognized the country's significance.<sup>14</sup>

Once President Assad courted by France and the United Kingdom, the EU became the 'victim' of Syria's renewed fortunes. Having conceded substantial points to the EU in order to sign the Association Agreement as well as to exit from diplomatic isolation, Syria's successful balancing strategy meant that by 2009 it was becoming more reluctant to push ahead with the Agreement. Not only the US was now openly courting Syria and extending the hand of friendship to Damascus, but Hezbollah's pivotal role in Lebanon and Hamas's attitude in the conflict with Israel strengthened the resistance front. Thus, in a rather spectacular and somewhat unexpected move, Syria now refused to sign the Agreement and 'humiliated' the EU by declaring it would not do so after the EU had already officially announced the date in which they expected Syria to sign. Now that Syria is again a central player in the region, it no longer needs to risk the domestic instability that would result from accelerating liberal market reforms as required by the provisions in the agreement.<sup>15</sup> Syria already suffers from significant social problems following its gradual insertion into the global economy.<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>10</sup> Landis: Syria key to Middle East peace process, Council on Foreign Relations [Online] Available from <http://www.cfr.org/syria/landis-syria-key-middle-east-peace-process/p14957> Accessed December , 2007

<sup>11</sup> Zisser , Eyal , Syria's diplomatic comeback; what next?, Mediterranean Politics, 2009; 14(3).

<sup>12</sup> Hyde-Price , Adrain, Normative power Europe: a realist critique, Journal of European Public Policy, 2006;13(2).

<sup>13</sup> Perthes, Volker, Syria under Bashar al-Assad: Modernisation and the Limits of change, London: Oxford University Press; 2004

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Khatib, Line, Islamic revivalism in Syria, London: Routledge; 2011

<sup>16</sup> Zorob, Anja, The Syrian-European Association Agreement and its Potential Impact on Enhancing the Credibility of Reform, Mediterranean Politics, 2008; 13(1).

There has been huge paradigm shifts in Syria-EU relations and future world harbors good hope from this new unification. The authors have a strong belief that in times to come the relation will prove to be historical. This is evident from the fact that Syria and the EU have obtained a number of important results in dealings with each other, which have not been lost even if the Agreement has not been signed. President Bashar feels that, Syria pushed into a corner and threatened, concessions end and a different response takes place. On one hand, if Syria is engaged constructively taking into account its legitimate interests, it can be part of a solution to many of the problems in the region. On the other, if international actors attempt to remake the Middle East through what can be interpreted as neo-imperialist policies, Syria can and probably will act as a brilliant spoiler if it is against core Syrian interest. Syria perceived the EU is more balanced mediator in the peace process than the US is. And the former was more interested to invest in the Syrian economy than the latter. In comparison, of his father, Bashar al-Assad has taken many positive steps to liberalize investment measures and carrying forward the Syrian economy in the direction of the free market. By this minimal analysis, it is imperative that Syria-EU relations not only manifest a direction to strengthen Syrian economy but also shows an unsuspected ability in president Bashar al-Assad to fill his father's boots and to navigate his country towards a position of strength against various future likely odds.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mohns, Erik and Cavatorta, Francesco, *Yes, he can, A reappraisal of Syrian foreign policy under Bashar al-Asad*, *Mediterranean Politics*, 2010; 15(2).