Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment

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Abstract

The alliance between Syria and Iran has been a persistent feature on the political landscape of the Middle East for more than three decades. Moreover, since its inception, it has had a major impact on developments in the region, as witnessed in recent years with the 2003 Iraq war, the 2006 Lebanon conflict and Iran's role in the Syrian civil war. The article provides an analytical framework to understand the forces which have shaped and influenced the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of the axis, and major myths and misconceptions concerning it. It also presents a general overview of the various phases in the development of the relationship, and its future prospects.

Keywords: Syria, Iran, Alliance, Power Politics, Diplomacy, US Policy, Iran-Iraq War, Lebanon conflicts 1982 and 2006, Hezbollah, Syrian Civil War

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Suriye ve İran: Değişen Bölgesel Ortamda İttifak

Özet

Suriye ve İran arasındaki işbirliği 30 yıldan fazla bir süredir Ortadoğu'daki siyasi durumda sürekli olarak gözlenen bir unsurdur. Dahası, söz konusu ittifak başlangıcından bu yana bölgedeki gelişmeler üzerinde oldukça etkili olmuştur. Bunlar arasında son yıllarda meydana gelen; 2003 Irak savaşı, 2006 Lübnan çatışması ve İran'ın Suriye iç savaşında oynadığı rol örnek verilebilir. Bu çalışma, Suriye-İran ittifakının evrimini şekillendiren ve etkileyen güçleri anlamada analitik bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Ayrıca eksen, başlıca mitler ve buna ilişkin kavram hatalarının öneminin altını çizmektedir. Aynı zamanda söz konusu ilişkilerin gelişiminde yer alan çeşitli evrelere ve geleceğe ilişkin genel bir bakış sunmaktadır.

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سوريا وإيران: تعاون التحالف في محيط إقليمي متغير

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خلاصة:

كان التحالف بين سوريا وإيران ميزة مستمرة على الأرضية السياسية في الشرق الأوسط على مدى العقود الثلاثة الماضية. كذلك، ومنذ بدايتها، كان له أثر كبير على التطورات في المنطقة، كما ثبت في السنوات الأخيرة في حرب العراق عام ٢٠٠٣، والصراع في لبنان عام ٢٠٠٦ ودور إيران في الحرب الأهلية السورية. يقدم المقال إطار تحليلياً من أجل فهم القوى التي شكلت وأثرت في تطور التحالف السوري الإيراني. إضافة إلى ذلك، أكدت على أهمية المحور، وعلى الأساطير والمفاهيم الخاطئة الرئيسية المتعلقة بذلك. كما قدم نظرة عامة حول المراحل المختلفة في تطور العلاقة، وآفاقها المستقبلية.

الكلمات الدالة: سوريا، إيران، التحالف، قوة السياسات، الدبلوماسية، السياسة الأمريكية، الحرب العراقية الايرانية، الصراعات اللبنانية عام ١٩٨٢ وعام ٢٠٠٦، حزب الله، الحرب الأهلية السورية.

"The chain of resistance against Israel by Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the new Iraqi government and Hamas passes through the Syrian highway…Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel."
Ali Akbar Velayati, Senior Advisor for Foreign Affairs to Iran's Supreme Leader, 6 January 2012

"What is happening in Syria is not an internal issue, but a conflict between the axis of resistance and its enemies in the region and the world. Iran will not tolerate, in any form, the breaking of the axis of resistance, of which Syria is an intrinsic part."
Saeed Jalili, Head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, 6 September 2012

Introduction

Without doubt, one of the most fascinating developments in modern Middle East politics has been the emergence and continuity of the Syrian-Iranian alliance since its formation in 1979. For more than three decades now, the Tehran-Damascus axis has continued to baffle many observers. Pointing to differences in their respective ideologies, as well as their political foundations and structures, many analysts have been perplexed as to how a revolutionary, pan-Islamic theocracy such as Iran could ally itself with a secular, pan-Arab, socialist republic like Syria.[1] Moreover, while Ba'thist Syria claims to be an ardent supporter and the rightful leader of the pan-Arab cause, Iran champions Islamic universalism and rejects secularism.[2]

The Syrian-Iranian axis has endured for over thirty-three years, in spite of the many challenges that it has faced and periodic strains in the relationship. Overall, the longstanding ties between these two states continue to be of great interest at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly in view of major developments in the Middle East in recent years such as the Syrian Uprising and Iran's support for the Assad regime since March 2011, the 2006 Lebanon war which pitted Israel against the Syrian and Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah movement, and heightened cooperation in general between Tehran and Damascus since the 2003 Iraq war.

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1   Yair Hirschfeld, "The Odd Couple: Ba'thist Syria and Khomeini's Iran," in *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. Avner Yaniv and Moshe Ma'oz (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 105 and Shireen T. Hunter, "Syrian-Iranian Relations: An Alliance of Convenience or More?" *Middle East Insight*, June/July 1985, pp. 30-31.

2   Hirschfeld, p. 105.

The purpose of this article is to provide an analytical framework to understand the forces which have shaped and influenced the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Furthermore, it will highlight the importance of the axis, and major myths and misconceptions concerning it. The article will also present a general overview of the various phases in the development of the relationship, and its future prospects.

The Importance of the Syrian-Iranian Alliance

Generally speaking, there are three important reasons to study and understand the Tehran-Damascus axis. Firstly, the alliance has had a significant impact on Middle East politics over the past three decades, as we have seen again over the past few years since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Secondly, it has proven to be an enduring relationship that has lasted over thirty years now, which is quite extraordinary when one takes into consideration the volatility and shifting political sands in the Middle East. Thirdly, the alliance is still misunderstood in certain respects by many regional and political observers. Hence, this has led to many inaccurate assessments on the aims and actions of the two partners, and gross oversimplification of the complex state of affairs relating to the alliance and regional politics.

Over the past three decades, the two partners have had some noticeable successes in frustrating the designs and policies of Iraq, Israel and the United States in the Middle East. Through their continuous collaboration, they played a critical role in stemming Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980, and ensuring that Saddam Hussein's Iraq would not become the predominant power in the Middle East. They were also able to thwart Tel Aviv's strategy to bring Lebanon into its own orbit, following the June 1982 Israeli invasion of that country and occupation of almost half its territory. Through the use of Lebanese proxies - most notably Hezbollah - Syria and Iran were able to expose the limits of Israeli military power and forced Tel Aviv to withdraw from the territory it occupied between 1984 and 2000. Concurrently, in this same arena, they were able to inflict one of the very few foreign policy setbacks that Ronald Reagan suffered during his two terms in office as US president in the 1980s. Even in the post-Cold War era, with American predominance on the regional and world stage, the imposition of economic sanctions on both countries, and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Syria and Iran have been able to wield considerable power and influence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Lebanon and - directly and indirectly - on world oil markets, as events in recent years have demonstrated.

A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Syrian-Iranian Alliance

Contrary to prevailing views (due in large part to the authoritarian nature of the Syrian and Iranian regimes and their unpopularity in many quarters), the alliance has been primarily defensive in nature, aimed at neutralizing Iraqi and Israeli offensive capabilities in the region, and preventing American encroachment in the Middle East. While the initial impetus for the alliance came from the overthrow of Iran's conservative, pro-Western monarchy in February 1979, the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 served as a major catalyst in bringing Syria and Iran closer together, with Syria providing invaluable diplomatic and military assistance to help Iran stave off defeat and expel Iraqi forces from its territory by May 1982. In turn, when Israel launched its second invasion of Lebanon, and challenged Syria in its backyard a month later in June 1982, Iran lent its support to Syria, in part, by mobilizing Lebanon's Shi'a population to drive out Israeli and Western forces during 1983-1985. From 1988 to 1989, prior to the Kuwait conflict, the two allies cooperated in Lebanon to crush Michel Aoun's anti-Syrian revolt which was interestingly enough backed by Iraq, Israel, and other states. More recently, following September 11, the Bush administration's "war on terror" and especially the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, raised concerns in Damascus and Tehran, ushering in a period of heightened cooperation and frequent consultations between the two allies. The two partners have also signed a number of defense agreements in recent years.

In general, defensive alliances which have set and limited objectives are more stable and durable.[3] This, in part, explains the longevity of the 33-year-long partnership. Defensive alliances are less fragile than offensive ones. Offensive alliances quite often fall apart once the opponent has been attacked and vanquished. The rationale for maintaining the alliance consequently ceases to exist for the members, and they frequently fall out and squabble over the fruits of their victory.[4]

Furthermore, it should be underscored that another reason that has contributed to the stability and longevity of the alliance is that the two part-

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3   Herbert S. Dinerstein, "The Transformation of Alliance Systems," *American Political Science Review*, 59, No. 3 (1965), p. 599.

4   George Liska, Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 39-40 and Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival*, 39, No. 1 (1997), p. 159.

ners' priorities differ in the two arenas in which they cooperate. For Iran, the Persian Gulf region is the main area of concern, while for Syria, it is the Levant. Over time, by continually consulting one another and modifying their aims, the two allies came to recognize this reality. Consequently, they tried to coordinate their policies and accommodate one another, while at the same time, protecting and furthering their own interests.[5] More specifically, after a number of crises in the relationship which erupted between 1985 and 1988, when Iran in particular was pursuing certain policies in Lebanon against the wishes of Syria, through continuous consultations, an understanding was eventually reached on key issues, whereby Syrian interests took precedence in the Arab-Israeli arena, while in the Gulf region, Damascus would defer to Tehran. Therefore, the more complementary the interests of alliance members, the more easily intra-alliance compromises and agreements can be reached.[6] Although, their interests and policies did not always converge, through regular consultations, the two allies gradually tried to resolve their differences, harmonize their positions and coordinate their actions.

Another key factor which helps shed light on the nature and longevity of the Syrian-Iranian partnership is the role of ideology. Ironically, a crucial element in the relative success and durability of the alliance is that the political elites of these two authoritarian regimes espouse different ideologies; and herein lies the paradox. Quite often, alliances between states that adhere to the same trans-national ideology are more likely to be short-lived than those in which ideology plays a secondary role. This is particularly true in the Middle East where authoritarian regimes predominate, and frequently use ideology as a tool to boost their political legitimacy and power base domestically and in neighboring countries. Revisionist ideologies such as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism have quite frequently been divisive, because they are used to project power and influence, and to destabilize rival states.

In the Middle East, the record clearly shows that states sharing a common ideology compete for the mantle of leadership rather than form durable alliances. Each state may claim to be the legitimate leader, and may even demand others to relinquish their rights and sovereignty to form a single political entity. This was quite evident in the rivalries between

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5   Liska, p. 62, 69. Liska argues that consultations strengthen alliance cohesion since they reinforce solidarity and equality among the members.

6   ibid, p. 82.

the pan-Arab regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq between the 1950s and 1990s, including the competition between the rival wings of the Ba'th Party in Syria and Iraq. Another poignant example of rivalries between states with similar ideologies was the animosity between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan until 2001. It should not be forgotten that Tehran almost went to war with the Taliban in August 1998 after the massacre of thousands of Afghan civilians and a dozen Iranian consular officials in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, when more people were killed than in the September 11 attacks. Iran massed over 100 thousand troops on the Afghan-Iranian border and held ground and air maneuvers. Overall, the historical record in the post-1945 era demonstrates that alliances among Arab states and communist countries that sought to form a single, centralized movement have been unstable and short-lived. In the final analysis, common ideologies have often served as obstacles to unity, prompting states to compete with one another rather than form durable alliances.[7]

When looking at Iran and Syria, it is evident that Iran (a non-Arab country) is not trying to be the standard-bearer of Arab nationalism, unlike Syria, which considers itself "the beating heart of Arabism." Syria, for its part, is not vying for leadership of the Islamic revivalist movement in the Middle East. Overall, there has been neither ostensible competition on the ideological level (except in Lebanon during 1985 to 1988) nor fear that one partner might upstage the other, precisely because of distinctly different ideological platforms.

At the same time, it should be noted that both Ba'thist Syria and Islamist Iran have been fiercely independent states, whose political elites share certain perceptions and world views, and in fact their secular and fundamentalist ideologies overlap in certain respects. While Iran has tried to use its brand of revolutionary Islam to transcend nationalism, create Muslim unity in the region by surmounting Arab-Iranian political divisions and Shia-Sunni religious differences, and demonstrate its solidarity by actively participating in the Arab-Israeli struggle, Syria, as the self-proclaimed birthplace and heartland of Arabism, has striven to overcome the political fragmentation of the Arab world by acting as a vehicle for Arab unity. Hafez Assad, Ruhollah Khomeini and their successors have viewed the Middle East as a strategic whole and regarded their alliance

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7   Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 35-36, 206-212 and "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," p. 163.

as a vital tool to assert themselves, to further what they see as in the Arab and Islamic interest, and to increase their room for maneuver by diminishing foreign - particularly American - influence in the region. As a result, to advance their common agenda over the years and decades, both regimes have put longer-term interests before short-term gains. This was clearly manifested in the period between 1985 and 1988 when the temptation to terminate the alliance may have been great, particularly for Syria, but instead the alliance was consolidated due to overarching strategic concerns and long-term interests.

As staunchly independent states, it is important to understand the main foreign policy priorities and key objectives of the ruling elites in Damascus and Tehran. The core priority of course for both the Iranian Islamist and Syrian Ba'thist governments, in view of their authoritarian nature, is regime survival. The second priority is national security which in general terms means the maintenance of the territorial integrity and independence of their respective countries. With regard to national security, for Iran, its two main policy objectives are: 1) to be the primary regional player in Persian Gulf affairs; and 2) to ensure that a government hostile towards Tehran does not eventually emerge in Baghdad. With respect to Syria, its two major policy aims are: 1) to regain the Golan Heights occupied by Israel since 1967; and 2) to have (at minimum) veto power over Lebanese affairs in order to ensure the government in Beirut does not adopt policies detrimental to Damascus' interests. Finally, the third priority is the aim to protect and promote, in the case of Tehran, what it perceives as Islamic interests in the region, and in the case of Damascus, what it sees as Arab interests. With regard to the former, this entails backing the Shi'a Lebanese Hezbollah and Sunni Palestinian Hamas movements, among others.

Misconceptions and Myths about the Syrian-Iranian Alliance

As previously mentioned, the Syrian-Iranian nexus has been consistently misunderstood in many respects throughout the years. A number of examples demonstrate this fact. First, since the inception of the alliance, one has consistently seen many scholars and observers writing off the Tehran-Damascus partnership as a short-term, opportunistic alliance or marriage of convenience against Saddam Hussein's Iraq that would dissolve rapidly once the Iraqi dictator was overthrown. Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003, yet the alliance still stands today. It is evident that this line of thinking was too simplistic, requiring instead a more nuanced and sophisticated approach and understanding of the overall relation-

ship. There are a number of factors that contribute to the existence and longevity of the axis. Iraq is crucial, but it is only one element in the overall equation.

A second misconception or myth has been to attribute the cooperation between the two regimes to the fact that the Syrian leadership is Alawite (an offshoot of Shi'a Islam), and Iran's clerical regime is Shi'a. This argument does not stand up under close scrutiny. The Syrian regime is secular, and its relationship with Tehran has been based on common political and strategic concerns. Furthermore, just as many orthodox Sunni Muslims may not consider Shi'as to be true Muslims, there are those in Shi'a Islam who do not consider Alawites to be true Muslims.[8] Various arguments have been put forth; for example that Hafez Assad did not visit Iran while Ayatollah Khomeini was alive because the latter did not consider the Syrian leader to be a true Muslim. Overall, the religious element has not been a determining factor and has had little, if any, salience.

A third misconception or myth is the belief that Iran in essence bought Syrian fealty during the 1980s with free oil shipments to Syria, particularly during a critical period between 1985 and 1988. However, with careful examination, one can confidently conclude that this argument is false. During the period between 1986 and 1987 when Iran was not forthcoming with oil shipments, Syria was under immense pressure from the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other states to abandon its alliance with Iran in exchange for huge financial injections and oil deliveries amounting to billions of dollars in aid. At the same time, the economic situation in Syria was dire, and the country's foreign exchange reserves had fallen dangerously low – enough to finance only a few weeks of imports. Furthermore, there was the prospect of war and greater isolation in the aftermath of the Hindawi affair, with Israel engaging in sabre-rattling and the specter of international sanctions. If economic and financial imperatives had been the key determinants in Syrian foreign policy formulation, the partnership would have collapsed, but this was not the case.

Stages in the Evolution of the Syrian-Iranian Alliance

Since the alliance has been an enduring feature on the political landscape of the Middle East in the post-1979 period, it has undergone

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8   See Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 237-254.

several stages in its evolution, and also significant changes in its power structure, due to regional and international events. In terms of the different phases in the development of alliance, at least seven distinct periods can be identified:

1) The Emergence of the Iranian-Syrian Alliance 1979-82;
2) The Zenith and Limits of Iranian-Syrian Power 1982-85;
3) Intra-Alliance Tensions and Consolidation of the Iranian-Syrian Axis 1985-88;
4) The Containment of Saddam's Iraq in the Levant and Gulf 1988-91;
5) Alliance Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Era 1991-2003;
6) The Reinvigoration of the Alliance after the Iraq War 2003-2011; and
7) The Syrian Uprising and Iran's Involvement 2011-Present.

In general, the first three stages were crucial, and constituted the formative years of the alliance, leading to the consolidation of the relationship. If one understands the period between 1979 and 1988, particularly the phase between 1985 and 1988, one can then easily comprehend and decipher how the partnership has evolved since, in spite of the radical changes and transformations that have occurred on the regional and international level.

Phase One – The Emergence of the Syrian-Iranian Alliance (1979-1982)

When the pro-Western, conservative, Shah of Iran was deposed in February 1979, Syrian President Hafez Assad considered the change in government in Tehran to be a positive development, and deemed it necessary to establish cordial ties with the new revolutionary regime which seemed sympathetic to the Arab cause and the plight of the Palestinians. In fact, Syria was the first Arab country to recognize the provisional government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, and overall the third, after the Soviet Union and Pakistan.

The warming of Syrian-Iranian relations during 1979-1980 coincided with the deterioration of Syrian-Iraqi and Iranian-Iraqi relations. After Egypt signed the Camp David Accords with Israel in spring 1979, Syria and Iraq held talks aimed at creating a political union between the two states. However, their efforts came to naught due to differences between the two sides, eventually resulting in mutual recriminations. Concurrently, relations between Baghdad and Tehran deteriorated sig-

nificantly. On the one hand, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein feared that Iran's brand of revolutionary Islam would destabilize his regime, and on the other hand, he interpreted the domestic turmoil in Iran as a sign of his neighbor's weakness. He believed the situation presented him with a golden opportunity to wage a short war to seize territory, overthrow the Islamist regime, and become a major regional power.

The Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 was the main catalyst in transforming the Syrian-Iranian rapprochement into a formal alliance. Damascus condemned Baghdad for initiating the conflict, calling it "the wrong war against the wrong enemy at the wrong time."[9] Once it became evident that Saddam Hussein was not going to halt the hostilities, Damascus began to provide invaluable diplomatic and military support to Tehran in order to stem the invasion, and to turn the tide of the war. On the diplomatic front, Syria thwarted the emergence of a united Arab front against Iran at the Amman summit in November 1980 hosted by Saddam Hussein's staunchest ally, King Hussein of Jordan. Syria massed 30,000 troops along its border with Jordan and persuaded half-a-dozen Arab League members to boycott the meeting. In military terms, it served as an important conduit for arms shipments to Iran, and provided various forms of military assistance, including facilitating the Iranian air strike against Iraqi military airfields at H-3 (Al-Walid, in the Iraqi pan-handle, 50 miles east of the Jordanian-Iraqi border) in April 1981, which resulted in the destruction of as much as 15-20% of Iraq's air force. The alliance was eventually formalized in March 1982 when a high-level Syrian delegation, headed by then Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam visited Tehran and concluded a series of bilateral agreements on oil, trade and a secret one on military matters. Syria also subsequently shut off the flow of Iraqi oil through the IPC (trans-Syrian) pipeline to the Mediterranean, thereby reducing Iraqi oil exports by more than half-a-million barrels/day, which translated into losses of US $17 million per day (or US $ 6 billion per annum).[10]

Subsequent to Khaddam's visit, Tehran launched a series of offensives between March and May 1982, which led to the expulsion of the Iraqi army from most of the territory it had occupied in Iran. During this

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9   Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 357.

10   Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), p. 180 and Hirschfeld, pp. 107-108.

period, Syria deployed army units along its border with Iraq, while its warplanes periodically violated Iraqi air space. These moves unnerved the Iraqis who had to contemplate the possibility of a two-front war, and were forced to deploy army units in the east, away from the war theater to resist the Iranian offensives.[11]

Phase Two – The Zenith and Limits of Iranian-Syrian Power (1982-1985)

The second phase in the evolution of the alliance was marked by close cooperation and intensive efforts to respond to new challenges not only in the Gulf region, but more importantly in the Levant. This period can be characterized as the height of Syrian-Iranian power in the region, but also paradoxically as one of lost opportunities which sowed the seeds of decline for the Syrian-Iranian axis due to the drastic shifts in the configuration of forces in the Middle East. The two allies continued their collaboration against Saddam Hussein after the expulsion of the Iraqi army from Iranian soil. A major milestone in this regard was Iran's decision to continue the Gulf war by invading Iraq in July 1982 in a bid to overthrow the Iraqi Ba'thist regime. It persisted in its efforts in the years that followed without achieving a decisive breakthrough. Hence, the conflict turned into a war of attrition and a stalemate ensued.

However, the primary arena of Syrian-Iranian collaboration and success during this period turned out to be the Levant due to new challenges that emerged on the Arab-Israeli front. Subsequent to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982, Tehran had signalled its willingness to assist its Arab ally in that theater. After the rapid rout of the Syrian forces, as a shrewd strategist, Hafez Assad devised a two-track approach to minimize the risk of further escalation and direct military confrontation with Israel, and, at the same time, roll back the Israelis. This could be described as a "sword and shield" strategy. The political linchpin of his strategy was Syria's special relationships with the Soviet Union on the international level, with Iran on the regional level, and with Lebanese allies on the local level. The offensive component, the "sword," was to utilize Iran's aid and influence among the Lebanese Shi'as to wage a campaign of subversion, terror and guer-

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11   ibid.

rilla warfare against their mutual opponents, the Gemayel government, the Israelis and the US and French contingents of the Multinational Force in Lebanon. The defensive element, the "shield," was to rebuild and expand Syria's conventional forces with Soviet assistance in order to deter an Israeli first strike and achieve strategic parity with Israel. This strategy worked well and paid off handsomely as their opponents were dealt a series of devastating blows resulting in the Israeli retreat and the withdrawal of US and French forces by 1984-85. The most notable ones were the assassination of Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel in September 1982, the demolition of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) headquarters in Tyre in November 1982, the destruction of the US embassy in Beirut in April 1983, the bombing of the barracks of the US Marine and French Paratrooper contingents of the Multinational Force in October 1983, the repeated demolition of the IDF headquarters in Tyre in November 1983, and the bombing of the US embassy annex in East Beirut in September 1984. These attacks led to the withdrawal of US forces in February 1984, the scrapping of the Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty in March 1984 and the phased withdrawal of Israeli troops from most of the territory they had initially overrun between January and June 1985.

At the same time though, Iran's refusal to terminate hostilities with Iraq, and the continuation of the Gulf conflict, led to countermoves, resulting in the gradual emergence of the Iraqi-Jordanian-Egyptian axis backed by Washington and Riyadh, and the relative decline of Syrian-Iranian power in the region. Concern that Saddam Hussein might be defeated also led to a US-Iraqi rapprochement, the provision of intelligence and non-military equipment by the Reagan administration to Iraq, and eventually the restoration of diplomatic relations between Washington and Baghdad in November 1984. Concomitantly, Moscow and Paris increased their military assistance to Iraq in order to prevent an Iranian victory. Hence, by the spring of 1985, it was clear that Syrian-Iranian power had reached its limits, and was now being contained by a formidable coalition of regional and extra-regional actors.

Phase Three – Intra-Alliance Tensions and Consolidation of the Axis (1985-1988)

The third phase in the evolution of the alliance represented the most problematic period in bilateral relations, and at the same time, was quite critical in laying the foundations of a durable partnership, in

other words, the long-term institutionalization of the axis. In both the Levant and the Persian Gulf, where the two allies had previously co-operated, they now developed conflicting agendas. Syria's failure to end the Lebanese civil war (following the withdrawal of Western and Israeli forces), and Iran's continuation of the Gulf war served to undermine the position of the Tehran-Damascus nexus. Furthermore, the two allies adopted different positions in Lebanon as the Israeli threat receded. On almost every issue in Lebanon, the two allies stood on opposite sides. The two allies had differing visions of the political future of Lebanon. Syria wanted to reform the political system and establish a stable, secular state within its sphere of influence, while Iran seemed to favor the creation of a theocratic system mirroring its own model. The rapid rise of the fundamentalist, pro-Iranian Hezbollah movement at the expense of the secular, pro-Syrian Amal militia led to tensions and recurrent clashes between the two groups. In addition, during the Amal-led siege of Palestinian refugee camps between 1985 and 1987, Syria steadfastly supported its proxy much to Iran's dismay which tried to mediate and end confrontation peacefully.

Concurrently, in the Gulf, Iran's determination to prosecute the war against Iraq caused a great deal of concern, prompting a growing number of states to throw their weight behind Baghdad. As Tehran became increasingly isolated and the prospects for an Iranian victory faded, Assad grew ambivalent about the continuation of the conflict and seemed inclined to favor a negotiated settlement. There were other areas of contention also, such as the Syrian-Jordanian rapprochement, intermittent Syrian-Iraqi negotiations, and Syria's confrontation with the Sunni Islamic Unification Movement of Shaikh Said Shaban in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli. However, through constant consultations, the two allies were able to prioritize their interests, resolve their differences, and redefine the parameters of cooperation during 1985-1988, thereby leading to the maturation and consolidation of the alliance. The resurgence of Iraq's power by the late 1980s as it turned the tables on Iran in the Gulf war, the gradual withdrawal of Soviet support for Syria during the Gorbachev years, the concurrent ascendance of US influence in the Middle East, and the need for the two allies to cooperate in order to stabilize the situation in Lebanon, altogether, helped cement the relationship.

Phase Four – The Containment of Saddam's Iraq in the Levant and the Gulf (1988-1991)

During the fourth phase, in the inter-war period between the end of the Iran-Iraq hostilities in August 1988 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait exactly two years later (in August 1990), Syria and Iran continued their collaboration due to Iraq's growing power and assertiveness throughout the region. By now, Saddam Hussein possessed one of the five largest military establishments in the world, and was indisputably the dominant power in the Gulf region. Bilateral cooperation was made imperative also by the formalization of the counter-axis that had emerged in the 1980s, with the creation of the short-lived Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) consisting of Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and North Yemen in February 1989.[12] The main challenge came in Lebanon, where an anti-Syrian revolt led by the commander of the Lebanese army, General Michel Aoun, provided Saddam Hussein with an irresistible opportunity to hit back at his Syrian rival by providing arms to Aoun's forces. Iran, although weak, isolated and unable to challenge Iraq in the Gulf, assisted Syria by mobilizing Hezbollah and other Lebanese groups in the conflict against Aoun, who was eventually defeated by the Syrians and their allies in 1989. Besides involvement in Lebanon, Iraq pursued an activist foreign policy by assisting Mauritania in its conflict with Senegal, aiding the Khartoum government in its efforts to crush the rebellion in southern Sudan, encouraging the unification of North and South Yemen, maintaining an inflexible stance in the peace negotiations with Iran, holding joint military exercises with Jordan, and making inflammatory statements threatening Israel.[13]

During the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis, Iran, which had been exhausted after 8 years of war with Iraq, stayed out of the fray and remained neutral, while Syria joined the US-led coalition in order to cut down Saddam Hussein and reap the benefits of being on the side of the victors, including George H. W. Bush's promise to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. There was some speculation at the time that the Teh-

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12 For a good analysis of the ACC, see Curtis R. Ryan, "Jordan and the Rise and Fall of the Arab Cooperation Council," *Middle East Journal*, 52, No. 3 (1998), pp. 386-401.

13 Joe Stork and Ann Lesch, "Background to the Crisis: Why War?" in *The Persian Gulf War: Views from the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Herbert H. Blumberg and Christopher C. French (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), p. 21 and Amatzia Baram, "Calculation and Miscalculation in Baghdad," in *International Perspectives on the Gulf Conflict 1990-91,* ed. Alex Danchev and Dan Keohane (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994), p. 26.

ran-Damascus nexus was falling apart due to a thaw in Iranian-Iraqi relations, but this did not turn out to be the case. In fact, during the crisis, Hafez Assad visited Tehran and received assurances from the clerical leadership that Iran would maintain its neutrality and abide by UN-imposed sanctions on Iraq. Both sides also took a further step to consolidate and institutionalize their alliance by establishing the Joint Higher Syrian-Iranian Cooperation Committee, chaired by their respective vice-presidents and foreign ministers. The aim of this body was to forge closer political, economic and military ties between the two sides through regular consultations.

Phase Five – Alliance Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Era (1991-2003)

Following Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf conflict and end of the Cold War that same year, Syria and Iran preserved their links for four major reasons. First, they maintained and expanded their political, military and economic relations in view of the dominant position of the US in the region and the world with the gradual retreat and eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the rapidly changing political landscape of the Middle East and the uncertainties that it brought. Second, Damascus considered the nexus with Tehran to be a vital instrument for advancing its interests in the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace talks. Syria needed Iran in order to promote its objectives in Lebanon, by exercising influence and control over Hezbollah and encouraging its fighters to attack Israeli forces in the self-declared security zone in southern Lebanon between 1991 and 2000. It also aimed to play the "Iran card" in the peace negotiations with the Israelis and Americans in order to regain the Golan Heights. Damascus considered the nexus with Tehran to be a vital instrument for advancing its interests in the Arab-Israeli conflict and peace talks. Third, as long as Saddam Hussein remained in power, the two allies, particularly Iran, believed the maintenance of the alliance to be essential in order to keep Iraqi power in check. Fourth, starting in 1991, the two allies undertook a joint program to acquire the capability to manufacture ballistic missiles domestically. Towards this end, they also sought technology transfers and assistance from Russia, China and North Korea. This could be attributed in large part to Iraq's success in using surface-to-surface missiles against Iran in the first Gulf war, and against Israel in the Kuwait conflict. In the Syrian case, this was also motivated by Israel's over-

whelming superiority in conventional and non-conventional weapons. Tehran along with Pyongyang helped build missile production facilities in Syria for example in Hama and Aleppo.[14]

Eventually, the support for Hezbollah in order to make sure that Israel paid a price for the continued occupation of the self-declared security zone and the Golan Heights paid off handsomely. An increasingly effective guerrilla campaign mounted by the Lebanese movement throughout the 1990s culminated in the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. This was the first time that Israel withdrew from occupied territory without signing an agreement. Concomitantly, between 1991 and 2000, Damascus participated in US-brokered peace talks with Tel Aviv in a bid to regain the Golan Heights in exchange for peace and recognition of Israel. However, this process did not bear fruit. Washington tried to corner and isolate Iran during much of the 1990s under the dual containment policy. Although expectations emerged for a thaw in US-Iranian relations during the early years of Mohammad Khatami's presidency, this proved to be a false dawn as the reformist president demonstrated his lack of resolve and courage to take on the more hard-line elements within the regime which were opposed to any rapprochement with the US. Perhaps the most detrimental aspect of Syrian-Iranian policy during the 1990s was the support both states provided to varying degrees for Islamist movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Although one could be skeptical whether the Oslo process would have indeed borne fruit at the end of the day, the suicide attacks undertaken by extremists, especially those targeting Israeli civilians contributed significantly to destroying trust and confidence and any prospects for success in the peace negotiations.

Phase Six – The Reinvigoration of Alliance Cooperation since the 2003 Iraq War

In the sixth phase, after the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, cooperation between the two allies increased significantly. Syria and Iran viewed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by US-led forces in April 2003 with ambivalence. On one hand, both welcomed the toppling of their long-time foe. On the other hand, the speed of the military victory initially raised fears that they could be the next targets in the Bush administration's "war on terror." However, once it became clear that

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14   See *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1991*, p. 684, and *The Times*, 12 November 1993.

Washington faced major difficulties, and was becoming bogged down in Iraq, there was a degree of relief in Tehran and Damascus. Both fuelled the insurgency in Iraq for a number of years to prevent the US from using its foothold in Iraq as a springboard to attack Iran and Syria. Tehran tried to maintain and cultivate close ties with all the major Iraqi political parties and militias, particularly the Shi'a ones, in order to ensure that the new government in Baghdad would not assume a hostile stance towards it. Damascus initially aided and abetted the passage of Arab and Sunni Muslim fighters from Syrian territory into Iraq, including those of Al-Qaeda. Neither Damascus nor Tehran wanted Iraq to be plunged into anarchy and civil war, but as long as Washington maintained a high-profile military presence until the withdrawal of its forces in 2011, they preferred the continuation of a degree of volatility and uncertainty in Iraq to pin down US-led forces and deflect attention away from them.

With regard to the 2006 war in Lebanon, irrespective of whether the war had been planned by either or both sides, one thing is for certain, once the hostilities started, the US found it expedient to prevent a speedy end to the conflict in the UN Security Council for more than one month, calculating that a sustained Israeli ground, sea and air assault on Lebanon lasting several weeks would weaken and hopefully destroy Hezbollah, thereby, denying the Syrian-Iranian camp of one of its major trump cards in the regional power struggle against Washington and Tel Aviv. From the US perspective, the destruction of Hezbollah would have also paved the way for possible military action against Iran if the dispute over Tehran's nuclear program was not resolved politically on terms that Washington found advantageous and favorable. This is because potential Hezbollah retaliation against Israel serves as a trip wire for US military action against Iran and Syria. It is noteworthy that in a premature, but telling statement during the conflict, then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice confidently asserted, "We are witnessing the birth pangs of a new Middle East."[15]

In terms of who emerged as the victor in the 2006 war, although Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed victory, in the greater scheme of things, it was not so much that Hezbollah won, but Israel that lost. Tel Aviv set high benchmarks for victory, including the freedom of the

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15   Rami G. Khouri, "New Rules for the Middle East," *The New York Times*, 26 May 2008.

two Israeli soldiers seized at the outset of the conflict and the annihilation of Hezbollah. However, it fell short of its stated objectives. Hezbollah was weakened, but at the same time, it demonstrated enormous resourcefulness and resilience during the fighting, particularly in the realm of electronic warfare (EW), and in the immediate aftermath of the conflict with its recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. It should be underscored that subsequent to the month-long war, Hezbollah gained enormous popularity and support among the masses in the Arab-Muslim world. Later, in July 2008, Hezbollah scored a major symbolic victory when it exchanged the bodies of the two Israeli servicemen for five Lebanese prisoners, most notably Samir Qantar, and the remains of 199 others.

In January 2011, Hezbollah orchestrated the collapse of the government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri after his refusal to cease cooperation with the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigating the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Then in August 2011, it condemned the indictments and arrest warrants issued by the UN tribunal against four of its members implicated in the murder of the former Lebanese prime minister. These events, coupled with Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime since the beginning of the unrest in Syria, have polarized the situation in Lebanon. Although, Hezbollah finds itself increasingly on the defensive and isolated in Lebanon and abroad, it still enjoys the backing of Syria and Iran, and remains a force to be reckoned with domestically. There are fears that heightened tensions and a spill-over of the Syrian crisis into Lebanon could result in an outright confrontation and plunge the country into a new civil war.

Phase Seven – The Syrian Uprising and Iran's Involvement 2011-Present

When the wave of popular protests first began in Tunisia in the winter of 2010-2011 and spread to neighboring Arab countries, Tehran declared its support for the demonstrations, which largely challenged the authority of conservative, pro-Western regimes. Portraying the opposition movements as Islamist, the Iranian leadership confidently declared that the Arab Spring would usher in a new pan-Islamic era in the Middle East and North Africa, in which authoritarian regimes would be supplanted by Islamist governments. From Tehran's perspective, the tide had finally turned against the West and its regional allies. History seemed to favor Iran and its supporters.

All this changed with the eruption of protests in Syria, which caught Iran off guard and put it in an extremely awkward position. Tehran faced Hobson's choice – two unattractive options. If it chose to stand by its most valuable and longstanding Arab ally it would be viewed as hypocritical and opportunistic by the masses in the Arab-Muslim world. On the other hand, if it stood by idly and refrained from supporting the Assad regime, there was no guarantee that if a new government came to power in Damascus it would cultivate close ties with Tehran. Given the circumstances, Iran chose to throw its weight behind the Syrian regime. This decision not only tarnished its reputation in the Middle East, but also that of its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, which has also backed the Syrian government. Relations between Tehran and the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas, have also become strained since the latter has declared its support for the Syrian rebels.

Tehran initially hoped that by assisting the Ba'thist regime, Damascus would be able to ride out the crisis within a short time. As a result, Iran staunchly supported Assad's efforts to crush the opposition by providing technical support and expertise to neutralize the opposition. The Iranians provided advice and equipment to the Syrian security forces to help them contain and disperse protests. In addition, they gave guidance and technical assistance on how to monitor and curtail the use of the internet and mobile phone networks by the opposition. Iran's security forces have had plenty of experience and learned valuable lessons in this regard since the violent crackdown against opponents of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad following the disputed Iranian presidential elections of June 2009. Specialist personnel and units from the Iranian security apparatus, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite Qods Force, police and intelligence were also dispatched and deployed in Syria to assist in defeating armed opposition fighters from the Free Syrian Army and foreign Sunni Islamist groups.[16] However, their numbers were limited, and not as opposition sources claimed in the thousands.

By the summer of 2011, as the confrontation in Syria turned into a protracted affair with no end in sight, the Iranian leadership began to worry that it might be on the wrong side of history and had growing doubts

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16   For details, see David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press), p. 128, Ian Black, "Iran Confirms It Has Forces in Syria and Will Take Military Action If Pushed," *The Guardian*, 16 September 2012, and Con Coughlin, "Iran Sends Elite Troops to Aid Bashar al-Assad Regime in Syria," *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2012.

about the wisdom of its policy. In order to hedge its bets, Tehran approached some Syrian opposition groups to assess their stance on various issues relating to Iran, Israel, Lebanon and the United States. However, nothing substantive seems to have resulted from these and subsequent overtures.

As the Syrian crisis continued into the autumn and winter of 2011, it increasingly assumed both a regional and international dimension. A proxy war began to emerge involving both regional and international actors. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states began to provide material and financial support to the Syrian opposition. As a result, Iran, Hezbollah, and to some extent Iraq felt compelled to throw their support fully behind the Assad regime. On the international level, the US and European Union closed ranks to exert pressure and isolate Damascus. In the UN Security Council, Russia and China consistently thwarted Western efforts to punish Syria and blocked any move that could lay the groundwork for foreign military intervention in support of the Syrian opposition.

Iran and its allies increasingly came to view the situation in Syria as a zero-sum game, fearing that the ouster of the Syrian Ba'th could pave the way for the emergence of a new regime in Damascus that would be hostile towards Tehran. Consequently, the Iranian leadership made a strategic decision to fully support Assad by providing arms, oil and financial aid.[17]

More recently in 2012, when the United Nations and Arab League appointed Kofi Annan and later his successor, Lakhdar Brahimi, as special envoys to mediate and resolve the Syrian conflict, Iran welcomed these moves. Tehran would like to be part of any multilateral initiative aimed at ending the current crisis and to have a role in determining the political outcome in Syria. Although it participated in quadripartite talks involving Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia in September 2012, the US and its allies seemed determined to exclude Iran from any negotiated settlement.

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17   See *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 2012, and Lina Saigol, "Iran Helps Syria Defy Oil Embargo," *The Financial Times*, 18 May 2012.

Conclusion

Clearly, the current crisis is the greatest challenge facing the thirty-three-year-old Syrian-Iranian alliance. If the Assad government is toppled, this would represent a major setback for Iran. In fact, it would be the most significant loss for the clerical regime since at least 1988, when it was forced to end the war with Iraq and sue for peace. Overall, it could be argued that if such an event were to occur, it would be the greatest loss for the Islamic Republic on the regional level since its creation in 1979. It would also constitute a major blow, particularly in terms of the Islamic Republic's ideological and foreign policy objectives. Syria has been the only stalwart Arab supporter of Iran. Furthermore, it continues to serve as a major conduit for Iranian arms shipments and material support to Lebanon's Hezbollah. Since the end of the 2006 Lebanon conflict, Damascus and Tehran have built up Hezbollah into a formidable force with an arsenal of some 40,000 rockets and missiles.[18] The overthrow of the Assad regime could transform the regional situation overnight. Not only would Iran lose its most important Arab ally, but also its ability to provide support for Hezbollah and to influence the situation in Lebanon and in the Arab-Israeli arena would be severely curtailed. The nightmare scenario for Iran would be for the Syrian Ba'th to be replaced by a Sunni fundamentalist regime that is staunchly anti-Iran and anti-Shi'a, and closely allied with Tehran's regional rival, Saudi Arabia.

In conclusion, Tehran will do all it can to ensure that Bashar Assad will not be toppled. There is no doubt that the Syrian-Iranian alliance is at a critical crossroads. It should be underscored however, that irrespective of how much longer the Tehran-Damascus nexus endures, its impact on Mideast politics over the past three decades has been significant. It has undoubtedly left its mark on the political landscape of the modern Middle East.

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18   For details on Iranian support to Syria, see "Three-Way Bet: Hizbullah's Strategic Dilemma in Lebanon," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 2011, p. 30.

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