

Syria-Iran Relations (2000-2014)

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Abstract

The relationship between Syria and Iran has been a persistent feature on the political landscape of the Middle East for more than 34 years. The partnership between the two countries have a major impact on developments in the region, such as the Iraq war of 2003, the Israel-Hezbollah war of 2006, 2008, 2014, and Iran's role in the present Syrian uprising. The paper provides an analytical framework to understand the forces have shaped the alliance between the two countries. The paper also intends to investigate the roots of the Syrian-Iranian relations after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Since September 11th events, Iran has increasingly had impact on the issues such as war in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon as well as the war against global terrorism. Additionally, the research also reveals strong military and financial ties, as well as political and ideological connections, which appear to preclude any sort serious or lasting break in the relationship. Nevertheless, the relationship among them has evolved, though they appear to have share interests in some circumstances. Finally, the paper highlights the Iranian interference and involvement, personally and militarily in the Syrian crisis and it's implications on Iran's relations with the rest of the Arab states in the region.

Keywords: Syria, Iran, Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, Lebanon, Arab Spring, Hamas

1. Introduction

Syria gained independence from France in 1946, but it did not have viable government, leadership or national stability until the reign of the late Hafez al-Assad, which began in 1970. Between 1946-1970 Syria experienced numerous violent coups. Late Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria from 1970 until his death in 2000 when Syrian leadership was passed to his son Bashar al-Assad who continue to lead Syria at the present time. The relationship between the tow countries developed since the formation of Islamic Iran in 1979. The relations has continued regardless to differences in their respective ideologies, as well as their political foundations and structures. Many analysts have been perplexed as to how a revolutionary Islamic Iran could ally itself with a secular, pan-Arab socialist state like Syria.¹ The Syrian-Iranian relations endured over thirty-four years, in spite of the challenges that it has faced in the relationship. Overall, the long standing relations between them continue to be of great concern in view of major developments in the Arab world in recent years such as the Syrian Uprising and Iran's full support for the Syrian regime since March 2011, Israel-Hezbollah conflict of 2006, Israel-Hamas war of 2008, 2009, and 2014, and heightened cooperation between Syria and Iran since the 2003 United States led allies against Iraq. The purpose of this paper is to provide an analytical framework to understand the forces which have shaped the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian relations, and Iran's interference and involvement in Syrian domestic issues. The paper will also present a general overview of the various phases of Iran's involvement in the Syrian affairs and it's future implications on Iran. Syrian and Iran have viewed the Middle East as a strategic whole and regarded their cordial relations as a vital tool to assert their political elites, to further what they see as in their interests, and to increase the cooperation for maneuver by diminishing the American influence in the region.² It's important to understand the main foreign policy priorities and key objectives of the tow countries. The core priority for Syria and Iran is regime survival. The second priority is national security and the maintenance of the territorial integrity and independence of the tow states. With regard to Iran's national security, it's main policy objectives are to be the primary regional player in the Levant as well as in Arabian Gulf affairs. With respect to Syria, Iran's major policy aims are to extend full support to Syria against Israel and the United States policies and to have veto power over Lebanese affairs in order to ensure the Lebanese government does not adopt policies detrimental to Syrian interests.

The relations of cooperation between the two regimes still stands today, due to the fact that the Syrian leadership is Alawite (Shia Muslim), and Iran's Clerical regime is also Shia. In addition, their relations has also been based on common political and strategic concerns.³

The current crisis in Syria present a threat to the regional and international power, because present Syrian regime provides Iran with a regional Shia ally and with geographical freedom of movement to store, provides, and delivers weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza Strip which both working against Israel. Syria's relationship with Iran have fostered and have worked together in order to achieve their own personal goals in the region. The current crisis and instability occurring within Syria has the potential of profoundly effecting Iran's ability to achieve it's goals in the region as well as in the world. Additionally, Iran is providing verbal and physical support to keep Bashar in power and working against the desires and aspirations of the Syrian people. Nevertheless, the Syrian crisis is an important issue, because it may be the turning point in the historical Syria-Iran alliance and may provide the opportunity to change the Syrian-Iranian alliance and reduce Iran's ability to continue as a threat to the Levant. Losing control over some parts of his country, Bashar al-Assad is still in power and able to maintain control with the help of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. He has relied on allied countries, especially Russia, China and Iran to block international action, hoping to buy time to put down the protestors himself. By supporting Bashar;s regime in Syria, Russia would maintain a presence and influence in the Middle East in order to balance the power of the United States in the Middle East. Where as Iran desire to keep Bashar in power because of Bashar's commitment, alliance, and support of Iran's controversial goals in the region. Syria's relationship with Iran has served it's interests vis-a-vise it's struggle with Israel by repeatedly strengthening Syria's regional posture. The evolution of the Syrian-Iranian relationship serves as a case study by which to evaluate the analyses of Syria's foreign policy behavior. Finally, it provides historical framework for evaluating the current regime of basher and future trends in Syrian foreign policy decision-making ⁴

2. Syrian-Iranian Alliance (2000-2014)

Syria and Iran are strategic allies and Syria is usually called Iran closest ally. Both countries have had a strategic alliance ever since the Iraq-Iran war of 1980, when late Hafez al-Assad sided with Iran against his fellow Baath-ruled neighbor Iraq, and Syria for this act was isolated by some Arab states.⁵ Syria and Iran shared a common animosity towards the United States and Israel. Syria cooperates with Iran in providing Lebanese Hezbollah with arms.⁶ Syria's relations with Iran changed dramatically after the Iranian revolution of 1979. The relations with Iran from Syrian view point represented an opportunity for the late Hafez al-Assad to find a new counterweight to Israel and Iraq.⁷ Meanwhile, new Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini saw Syria as a conduit to the Shia community in Lebanon, and Khomeini himself advocated that an Iranian alliance with Syria could be useful to increase the Iranian influence in southern Lebanon.⁸ The relationship between the two states has sometimes been described as the Axis of Resistance.⁹ Syria and Iran maintained generally friendly relations until 1982, which a new partnership started between them. Three major events occurred that year led to steadfast their alliance. First, Syria was the only Arab state to support Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, by shutting down the Iraqi oil pipeline that passed through its territory.

This act cost Iraq's regime millions of dollars per day. In return, Iran provided Syria with free oil for the remainder of the war. Second, Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which led the two countries cooperated and supported the Shia militias in Lebanon. This was the first chance for Syria and Iran to coordinate their efforts, and military cooperation signaled a new phase of the emerging partnership. Third, Iran's support for the Syrian government brutal suppression of the Muslim brotherhood uprising in the city of Hama. This showed that Iran had a pragmatic side, able to place geopolitical realities above ideology, and chose to support a secular-pan-Arabism dictatorship. These three events transformed Syrian-Iranian into a hardened, durable alliance expectations and commitments.¹⁰ During the 1980s, Syria and Iran drew into a close partnership that neither had any interest in breaking. In the 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, again Syria found itself working against Iraq, allowing Iran to begin expanding its influence in Mesopotamia.¹¹ The end of the First Gulf War ushered in a short period of relative peace for the region, the September 11,2001 attacks and the ensuing wars in the Middle East altered the region's political calculus and led directly to a renewed strengthening of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Meanwhile, Syria had to deal with the United States war in the region and increasing international pressure to pull its troops out of Lebanon. Isolated by the international community, the tow regimes joined together in their shared anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism. The relationship of the two countries has become closer today than at any point in its thirty-four years history.

The Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Syria five times, while President Bashar al-Assad visited Iran three times. These visits reveal the depth of the Syrian- Iranian alliance.¹² Syria was the first Arab state to recognize the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, late Hafez al-Assad did not visit Iran, while Khomeini was alive, as Khomeini did not consider Hafez al-Assad to be a true muslim.¹³ Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria from 1970 until his death in 2000 when Syrian leadership was passed to his son Bashar and follow his father's step in keeping warm and cordial relations with Iran. During Bashar's reign relations between the tow countries depend on religious causes as well as on strategic, political, economic, and cultural points. Syrian regime cooperated with the Iranian during the Lebanese civil war, and the Iranian Islamic revolutionary Guards Corps with Syrian assistance, established and trained the Hezbollah Group in order to spread Shiaism in Lebanon. Both countries viewed Hezbollah as a useful lever against Israel and indeed to establish greater influence in Lebanese affairs.¹⁴ Syria and Iran had occasional differences in their policies, for instance, Iran was deeply ambivalent about the United States led intervention to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, while Syria participated in the coalition of nations to fight Iraq. Thus, still these disagreements never threatened to derail the relations between the tow states.¹⁵ The alliance between them deepened due to subsequent regional events such as the Iraq war, the Lebanese war of 2006 brought the tow states closer together. Meanwhile, Syria became increasingly dependent on Iran for political and military support as Bashar was unable to maintain positive relations with the Arab states during this time.¹⁶ On June 16, 2006, Iranian Defense Minister and his Syrian counterpart signed an agreement for military cooperation against the common threats presented by Israel and the United States. However, the agreement details were not specified. On the other hand, the Syrian Defense Minister Najjar stated that, 'Iran considers Syria's security it's own security, and we consider our defense capabilities to those of Syria'.¹⁷ Additionally, Iran has consistently invested billions of dollars in to the Syrian economy. Leadership of both countries declared that they would form an alliance to combat United States policies in the region and Israeli conspiracies against the Islamic World. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani declared on August 3rd 2013, on his inauguration day, that his country's alliance with Syria would continue¹⁸.

In order to understand the nature of the partnership between Syria and Iran, there are three major reasons to study and understand the Syrian-Iranian alliance, which are as below:

- 1- The alliance continued for 34 years between the two countries, and as seen again in recent years during the Israel-Hezbollah war of 2006, 2008, and 2014, and Iran's support for the Bashar's regime since the eruption of the Syrian crisis in March 2011.
- 2- The alliance has proven to be an enduring that has lasted 34 years in spite of the many challenges that it has faced in the relationship.
- 3- The alliance is of enormous importance since both states are situated in key locations in the region, contributing immensely to its geopolitical significance. One can argue that, those who aspire to control the Middle East must first win over Syria.' Whoever controlled Syria or enjoyed her friendship could isolate other Arab States'.¹⁹ Syria and Iran were able to expose the limits of Israel and the United States policies in the region. In the post cold war era, with American predominance on the region, and the imposition of economic sanctions on both countries, Syria and Iran have been able to wield considerable power and influence in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Leadership of both countries have viewed the Middle East as a strategic whole and regarded their alliance as a vital tool to assert themselves to the Arab and Islamic interests, and diminishing American influence in the region. As a result to advance their common agenda over decade, both regimes have put long term interests.²⁰ From a purely pragmatic point of view, the alliance between Syria and Iran is irrational. They do comprise one of the world's most improbable partnership. They do not share a language, a culture, and their citizens are not of the same ethnicity. The two countries forms of government are, diametrically opposed to one another, and finally, the Syria's inhabitants are majority Sunni, while the Iran's inhabitants are Shia. Regardless of these differences, the tow states today make up one of the strongest and most significant alliance in the entire Middle East. The underlying rational behind this alliance must be a shared ideology, which in this case includes anti the United States and Israel and active support of Palestinian Hamas movement and Lebanese Hezbollah. The Syrian Iranian Axis has gained notoriety in recent years for its increasingly brazen anti-western and anti-Israel rhetoric and the confident manner in which it has begun to behave in the sphere of international affairs. Thus, both countries viewed the western powers as their primary enemies during the formulation and conduct of their foreign policy.²¹ The continuing alignment of Syria and Iran is strategic interests and ideology, according to some analysts.

Indeed it could be so, because from the strategic viewpoint, the two regimes share goals as well as enemies, so it made sense geopolitically to join forces. Both shared enmity toward Iraq, the United States, and Israel. The status of Syria and Iran combined on the Iraqi border, naturally pushed the two countries toward each other. Both states signed a strategic cooperation agreement in 2004 and a treaty of mutual defense in 2006.²² Ideology acts as the second stimulus for the rising for the Syrian-Iranian cooperation. This is counterintuitive because Iran is an Islamic theocracy while Syria is a pan-Arabism Baath dictatorship. Meanwhile, the ideology transcends the divisions between different forms of government essentially an anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, and extending full support for Hamas movement and Hezbollah.²³ For Syria, anti-Zionism formed by its ruling ideology, for instance, the Iraq-Iran war was condemned by the late Hafez al-Assad, as describe the war as ‘The wrong war at the wrong time against the wrong enemy...that would exhaust the Arabs, divide them and divert them from the Israeli menace’.²⁴ The Syrian-Iranian relationship requires taking into account the strategic and ideology factors and their cooperation against shared enemies. The possibility that the Syrian-Iranian alliance is based on religion could be an additional source of its lasting strength. Though the Syrians majority are Sunni Muslims, the ruling Assad family belongs to a small group of Alawites-Shia. Thus, the Assad may see close relations with Iran as to boost the Shia credentials and also to retain power in a land of Sunni.²⁵ Meanwhile, Iran considers Syria’s regime a tool through which it can continue empowering shia’s throughout the Middle East. Finally, the religion factor would also explain Syria’s support to groups in Lebanon during the civil war. Overall, the Shia connection seems to have strengthened the Syrian-Iranian ties, even if it was not a major driver of the relationship. The Head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of Iranian Parliament, Boroujerdi said: ‘Over the past years, Tehran –Damascus relations have turned into the main Axis of resistance against the Zionist Regime of Israel and its international supporters, and have played a strategic and effective role in supporting the rights of the Muslims.’²⁶

3. Syrian Uprising and Iran’s Involvement (2011- Present)

The current crisis in Syria present a threat to the regional and international peace. The present Syrian regime provides Iran with a regional Shia ally and with geographical freedom of movement in order to store, provides and delivers weapons to Hamas and Hezbollah. The uprising in Tunisia began in the winter of 2010-2011 and spread to Libya and then Egypt. In this regards, Iran declared its support for the demonstrators, who largely challenged the authority of conservative pro-western regimes. The Iranian leadership declared that the Arab Spring would usher in a new pan-Islamic era in the Middle East in which a pro- western governments would be supplanted by Islamic governments.²⁷ All this changed with the eruption of the protests in Syria, Iran extended full political and military support for Assad’s regimes, ignoring the feelings and aspiration of the masses in the Arab Muslim world. By not supporting Bashar’s regime, Iran would have no guarantee that if a new government came to power in Damascus be friendly and has close ties with Tehran. Iranian leadership supported the Syrian regime, and tarnished its reputation in the Arab Muslim world. Iraq and Hezbollah also backed the Syrian regime. On the other hand, Iran’s relations with Hamas movement have also become strained due to Hamas support for the Syrian opposition.

Meanwhile, Iran hoped that the Syrian regime would be able to ride out the conflict within a short time. By supporting the Syrian regime, Iran provided technical support and expertise to neutralize the opposition. Additionally, Iran provided advice and equipment to the Syrian security forces to help them contain and disperse protesters. Iran’s also gave Syria guidance and technical assistance on how to monitor and curtail the use of technology network by the opposition. Specialist personnel and units from the Iranian security apparatus, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Quds Forces, and intelligence were also deployed in Syria to assist in defeating the Syrian opposition. Meanwhile, the popularity of Iran and Hezbollah reached an unprecedented nadir in the Arab States due to their support for the suppression of the Syrian protestors. Iran’s involvement in the Syrian crisis aimed to crush the protests in a short period.²⁸ As the Syrian crisis continued, it increasingly assumed both a regional and an international dimension. Regional as well as international actors involved, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States began to provide material and financial support to the free Syrian Army. On the other hand, Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraq throw their weight fully behind the Bashar regime. Internationally, the United States and Europe closed ranks to exert pressure and isolate Syria. meanwhile, Russia continued to ship arms to Syria. In the Security Council of the United Nations, Russia and China consistently thwarted western efforts to punish Syrian regime and blocked any move that could lay the groundwork for foreign military intervention in the support of the Syrian opposition.

However, Iran increasingly view the current situation in Syria as a zero-sum game fearing that the ouster of Bashar's regime could pave the way for the emergence of a new regime in Syria that would be hostile toward Iran. 29 In 2012, the United Nations and Arab League appointed Kofi Annan and later his successor Lakhdar Al-Ibrahimi, as special envoys to mediate and resolve the Syrian conflict. However, it was argued that the United States and its allies seem determined to exclude Tehran from any negotiated settlement of the Syrian conflict. A political dialogue and diplomatic solution has increased over the past year as the Syrian conflict dragged on into 2014. At present Bashar is losing ground and control of many parts of Syria to the opposition. To cope with current situation, Iran proposed a six point peace plan to end the conflict in which they are:

- 1- An immediate end to hostilities,
- 2- Lifting of sanctions
- 3- Release of political prisoners
- 4- National Dialogue
- 5- Formation of a transitional government
- 6- Elections for a parliament, constituent assembly, and the presidency.³⁰

The Syrian opposition rejected the plan, because it did not fulfill their basic demand, that is to say the removal of Bashar from power. Therefore, the Syrian crisis is the greatest challenge facing the Syrian-Iranian alliance. If Bashar's regime is toppled this would represent a major setback and defeat for Iran. Overall, it would also constitute a major blow in terms of the Iranian ideological and foreign policy objectives. Syria and later Iraq has been the only tow Arab states supporter of Iranian arms shipment and material support to Hezbollah.³¹

Throughout the present conflict in Syria, Iran has remained a steadfast supporter of Bashar's regime. Their Axis is made more striking by the fact that it is based on neither shared national interests nor religious values, but rather it is a tactical-cum- strategic partnership between two states. Iran has offered unwavering support to the Bashar regime and denounced the Syrain opposition as terrorist supported by the Gulf States, Israel, and the United States. Senior Iranian Former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, have referred to Syria as 'a golden ring of resistance against Israel'³² In addition to that, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei-Confidante Mchi Taeb stated that Syria is Iran's '35th province... if we lose Syria we won't be able to hold Tehran'³³ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has expressed solidarity with the Bashar regime, declaring that 'The Islamic Republic of Iran aims to strengthen it is relations with Syria and will stand by it in facing all challenges the deep strategic and historic relations between the people of Syria and Iran... will not be shaken by any force in the world'.³⁴

Syria's relationship with Iran have fostered in order to achieve their personal goals in the region. The ties between the tow countries has deepened over times, because each country has realized that it would be impossible to achieve their own personal goals in the region without the help of the other. The current crisis and instability occurring within Syria has the potential of profoundly effecting Iran's ability to achieve it is goals in the region. That is why Iran is providing verbal and physical support to keep Bashar in power and working against the desires of the Syrian people. At present, Iran has done all it can to ensure that Syria's regime will not be toppled by pouring in men, material, and money to bolster it is position. In spite of Iran's tremendous efforts and spending billions of dollars to prop up the Bashar's regime, the outcome is still unclear. Iran's religious men, politicians and leadership have expressed disappointment about the result in the past.³⁵ Finally, Iran has lost a great deal of the political capital in the Arab World, due to it is support for the Bashar regime and it is brutal suppression of the uprising. As a result of the above realities, the alliance between Syria and Iran is now at a critical crossroads, and one can assume that it's days numbered. Whatsoever, the outcome, Iran's relationship can not be restored to it is pre 2011 status.³⁶

4. Syrian-Iranian Military and Trade Cooperation

When Syria loss an strategic partner, the former Soviet Union at the cold war, Iran became new Syria's new arms supplier, increasing the Syrian regime dependency on Iran. Meanwhile, both states collaborated in aiding Hezbollah and Hamas militarily, in order to pressure Israel and shape the events in Palestine and Lebanon.³⁷ Until 2011 Syria and Iran maintained very cordial relations. Both countries signed a military cooperation agreement in 2006, and in August 2010, the signed a free trade agreement. Trade relations between the tow states were about 350 Million Dollars in 2010, with the aim of further increasing bilateral trade relations to 5 Billion Dollars in the future. ³⁸ During the Syrian uprising, Iran, Iraq and Syria signed a 10 Billion Dollars gas deal for the transit of Iranian gas to Europe.

Meanwhile, Iran continued to support the Syrian regime through funding the construction of a Syrian military base, which would make easier the arms to Syria to bolster the pressures on the Syrian economy, and by July 2011, Iran provided 2 billion dollars to Syria.³⁹ It can be argued that Syria is Iran's strategic partner in the region. Iran has increased its investment by providing Syria weapons and helping the regime to build its military. Further more Iran has also established a Revolutionary Guard Base in Damascus and Latakia. These bases aimed to secure Iran's ability to transit weapons and troops across Syria to provide an Iranian military footprint within close proximity to Israel and Lebanon. The Latakia base is also proving Iran with the ability to transit weapons with less cargo oversight by airline authorities. For this purpose, Iran has agreed to provide Syria with 23 Million Dollars to build a new complex at Latakia Air Port to handle the arms shipment. ⁴⁰ Additionally, Syria and Iran also maintain a partner and ally in the development of weapons of mass destruction guaranteeing mutual security and regional influence. Both countries were working together in building a nuclear weapons program. Therefore, the close ties between them aimed mainly in the development of weapons of mass destruction is a force multiplier for them because each country can share the knowledge of weapons engineers from each respective country, it increases the landmass available to build and hide weapons of mass destruction, and finally increases the potential production capacity. ⁴¹ Furthermore, Syria's cooperation with Iran on weapons of mass destruction technology creates a situation where both countries have access to nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.⁴²

During the 2011 Syrian uprising, Iran has aided Bashar's regime, in which the Iranian Republican Guard increased its level of technical and personnel support to strengthen Syria's ability to deal with the protesters. Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati stated that 'Iran is not prepared to lose this golden counterweight to Israel'.⁴³ Clearly Tehran provided Damascus with riot control equipment, intelligence monitoring techniques and oil. Additionally, Iranian snipers had been deployed in Syria to assist in the crackdown on protests.⁴⁴ In July 2011, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei describes the instability in Syria that 'In Syria, the hand of America and Israel is evident, wherever a movement is Islamic, Populist, and anti American, we support it'.⁴⁵

Syrian regime humbly needed Iran's intelligence support and likely became more urgent as the regime sought to suppress protests throughout Syria in the spring of 2011. The range of Iranian organizations have been involved in the effort, including Law Enforcement Forces, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. These designations also shed some light on the relationship between the two countries. Therefore, Iran dispatched Law Enforcement Forces to advise and assist Bashar regime in 2011.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Iran has conducted an extensive, expensive, and integrated effort to keep Bashar al-Assad in power. The Iranian Security and Intelligence Services are advising and assisting the Syrian military in order to preserve Bashar on power. These efforts have evolved into an expeditionary training mission using Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Ground Forces, Quds Forces, and Intelligence Forces. Additionally, Tehran has been providing Damascus essential military supplies by air. The air line of communication between the two countries is thus a key vulnerability for Iran's strategy in Syria. As The Syrian regime began to lose control over eastern and northern Syria in 2012, Iran's advisory and assistance mission continued to reinforce Bashar's geographically consolidated grip on central and southern Syria. The Quds Force is responsible for Iran's external operations, and Commander Qassem Suleimani played a prominent role managing Iran's activity in Syria. In this regard, the former Syrian Premier Riad Hijab stated after his defection: 'Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad, but Qassem Suleimani the head of Iranian regime's Quds Force'.⁴⁷

Aerial resupply is the most critical component of Tehran's material support to Damascus. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Iran supplied military equipment as well as personnel to Syria, which included missile components.⁴⁸ In 2012, Iran continued to supply Syria with personnel and weapons, including small arms ammunition, anti-aircraft guns, and mortar shells.⁴⁹ As soon as the opposition seized the Al-Qaim-Abu Kamal crossing point, Iran has resumed shipping military equipments to Syria over Iraq air space coinciding with constricting ground supply corridors.⁵⁰ By the beginning of 2013, Bashar took steps to formalize and professionalize the popular committee militias under a new group dubbed the National Defense Forces. Iran has contributed to establish this new organization and provide them with latest equipment and training.⁵¹ Meanwhile, Iran has been training Bashar's security forces inside Syria, since the beginning of the conflict. To confirm this fact, and in April 2013, fighters from Homs province claimed to have travelled to Iran for Urban warfare training.⁵²

Iran provided Syria with 30,000 tons of food supplies on November 11, 2014 to help the Syrian government with the shortages due to the crisis. The shipment arrived at the Mediterranean Sea.

The aid is also part of Iran's support for the Syrian regime, as Bashar is preparing to run for a third presidential term, while his people seeking his overthrow. Meanwhile, Iran and Hezbollah have been backing Bashar throughout the conflict. Iran also has been lending Bashar regime military and financial and by advising the Syrian government on strategy to fight the opposition. Furthermore, Iran on May 2014, extended a 3.6 Billion Dollars credit to enable Syrian government to buy oil products and also help up the diving value of the Syrian pound. As a result of the crisis, the Syrian economy has been hit hard and almost collapsed.⁵³ As Syrian crisis nears its fourth years, Iran has continued supporting the Syrian regime with all means it could to keep Bashar in power. As it seems that at present neither Bashar nor opposition fighters have a decisive edge of the battlefield. Iran has already spent billions of dollars propping up Syrian regime in what has turned into a sectarian war with Sunni Arabs.⁵⁴

5. Future Relationship between Syria and Iran

Geopolitical realities are bringing both countries together in an opportunistic alliance. The relationship between them can be of a strategic relation. They have a common goals, and agreed to a mutual defense treaties. The two countries see themselves as two states under siege surrounded by adversarial regimes, and the unified opposition against them reinforces the alliance. Both countries have an extensive, multifaceted ties ranging from political, economic relations to religious pilgrimages. Bashar al-Assad and his government has been a vocal proponent of the Iranian nuclear program, insisting that Iran should be allowed to develop nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes. The potential cooperation between them has been a consistent driving factor behind the contemporary international significance of their alliance.⁵⁵ Today, The Syrian Iranian relations is extremely robust and appears set to endure for the coming future. Pressure on them from the United States and the Western countries to put an end to their continued support to Palestinian Hamas and Hezbollah will continue to keep bilateral relations warm. Continued American forces presence in the region will ensure that the two states maintain their close relations, for geopolitical as well as ideological reasons. If the American forces withdraw from the region and lifting of sanctions, this would have little effect on the Syrian Iranian relations, since both have invested too much political and economic capital in each other.⁵⁶ Overall, The Syrian-Iranian relations will continue to evolve in the future. Both countries have political, economic and social ties which allowed for the creation and expansion of a formidable anti-Israel and anti-Western front. The Syrian-Iranian relations have remained strong even through periods of great hardship. Thus, a regime change in either country is the only likely path for a Syrian-Iranian break.⁵⁷

In conclusion, Iran supports the Syrian present regime because Iran knows very well that Bashar will continue his support and cooperation with Iran, which is vital to Iran's goals in the region. Furthermore, Iran also intended to manipulate events in the region in order to prevent regional as well as international resolution of the region's problems. Additionally, Iran seeks to maintain a regional Shia ally to keep the geographic freedom of movement to transit weapons and troops to and through Syria. If the Baath regime in Syria is removed, it's highly unlikely the new regime unfriendly and will be as accommodating in helping Iran achieve its regional and international goals.⁵⁸

6. Conclusion

Syria under Bashar al-Assad has had to consistently alert its tactics to remain pertinent in a competitive geopolitical milieu where it lacks the natural endowments for power that many of its neighbors possess. Despite this impediment, Syria has nonetheless remained central to the unfolding events throughout the region, over the past decades. Syrian-Iranian relationship presents one of the most appropriate manifestations of realpolitik foreign policy decision-making to further Syrian interests. The current political outlook supports a continued and strengthened Syrian-Iranian relationship. The significance of Syria to Iran's strategic interests obviously appeared when Ali Akbar Valayati, Iran's Senior Foreign Affairs Advisor, during a press conference in March 27, 2013 declared that 'Syria is the golden ring of resistance against Israel, and if it weren't for Syria's active government the country would become like Qatar or Kuwait. Iran is not prepared to lose this golden counterweight'.⁵⁹ The foreign policy of Iran is based on the principles of Shia, not the interests of Persian Nationalism. Iranian ideology reflected an imperfect combination Islamic social and political thought with the drives for political independence and of developments in the region. Nonetheless, the Iranian influence in the foreign relations of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen is best thought of in moral and symbolic terms.

Iran with its Islamic constitution and its stress on Islamic sources of social, economic and political policy, is a dramatic demonstration of the revolutionary potential of Islam in the contemporary world. The Iranian revolution spoke to the ability of peoples in the Arab Sunni states to organize domestic and international politics on their own terms, on their own way. In short, the Iranian policies demonstrated that minor players could seize the international initiative. Iran however, enjoys high prestige in Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen.

Clearly the Syrian crisis constitute a big challenge facing the bilateral relations between the two countries. If the Syrian regime is toppled, this would represent a major setback for Iran. In fact, it would be the most significant loss for Tehran. It could also be argued that if such an event were to occur, it would be a huge loss for Iran on the regional level since Iran's creation in 1979. additionally, it would constitute a major blow in terms of Iran's ideological and foreign policy objectives. The present Syrian regime has been the only Arab supporter of Iran, and continue to serve as a major conduit for Iranian arms shipment and material support in the region. The overthrow of the Syrian regime could transform the regional situation, and not only would Iran lose its most Arab ally, but also its ability to extend support to Iran's allies in the region. Thus, it is a disaster scenario for Iran if the Syrian regime to be replaced by a Sunni regime which could be closely allied with the rest of the Arab states and hostile to Iran.

Iranian strategy thus, seeks to preserve the Bashar al-Assad regime for as long as possible. Al-Assad family have been an ally of Iran, and Iran intends to continue supporting Bashar's remnants in Alawite-Majority regions even after the regime collapse. Iran is well aware that the loss of Bashar's regime will significantly limits its strategic depth and degrade Iran's ability to project power in the region. To compensate this loss, Iran look to expand its activities in other countries and regions. The present instability in Yemen indicates that Iran provided military support to Al-Houthi rebels outside of the Levant. Therefore, if Bashar's regime is collapsed, Iran will be forced to find a balance between continuing its heavy investment in the Levant and deepening its network and capabilities elsewhere in the region. Even with new moderate Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, Iran's political, financial and military support for the Bashar regime is unlikely to waver. Finally, the nature of Syrian-Iranian partnership has been pragmatic and in accordance with geopolitical and political-cultural realities of the region especially after the 2003 Iraqi crisis. As long as the American policy continues, there will be more focus on strong alliance in the region. Syrian-Iranian relationship will insist on a strong regional presence in accordance with Iran's larger economic, cultural, and political power. At present, the instability in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Yemen, and the war against global terrorism have made Iran more significant.

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