

*Viewpoints*  
No. 35

# Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?

Jubin Goodarzi

Assistant Professor and Researcher, International Relations Department,  
Webster University, Geneva

The alliance between Iran and Syria has been an important and persistent feature on the political landscape of the Middle East for more than three decades. The eruption of the Syrian uprising in the spring of 2011 has presented the greatest challenge to the survival of the Tehran-Damascus nexus. Does this signify the end of the partnership? This article provides a brief overview of the relationship and a detailed analysis of the evolution of Iran's policies, perspectives, interests, and options in the ongoing Syrian crisis.

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*“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

There is no doubt that one of the most intriguing developments in modern Middle East politics has been the emergence and continuity of the Iranian-Syrian alliance since its formation in 1979. 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 in recent years during the 2006 Lebanon war that pitted Israel against the Syrian- and Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement, and Iran’s support for the Bashar al-Assad regime since the eruption of the Syrian crisis in March 2011. Secondly, it has proven to be an enduring relationship that has lasted 34 years in spite of the many challenges that it has faced and periodic strains in the relationship. This is no mean feat. It is quite extraordinary when one takes into consideration the volatility and shifting political sands in the Middle East. Thirdly, the alliance is of enormous importance since both countries are situated in key locations in the Middle East, thereby contributing immensely to its geopolitical significance. With regard to Syria, in his classic work, *The Struggle for Syria*, Patrick Seale argued that those who aspire to control the Middle East must first win over Syria. According to him, “whoever controlled Syria or enjoyed her special friendship could isolate [other Arab states] and need bow to no other combination of Arab states.”<sup>i</sup> As far as Iran is concerned, many view it as the strategic prize in Southwest Asia and the Persian Gulf region. The country’s critical position is poignantly conveyed in Graham Fuller’s work on the geopolitics of Iran, *The Center of the Universe*.<sup>ii</sup>

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 U.S. president in the 1980s. Even in the post-Cold War era, with American predominance on the regional and world stage, and the imposition of economic sanctions on both countries, Syria and Iran have been able to wield considerable power and influence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region.<sup>iii</sup>

Furthermore, it should be noted that both Ba'athist 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 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 maneuvering 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.<sup>iv</sup>

With regard to the Arab Spring, when the initial 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 demonstrators, who 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.<sup>v</sup>

All this changed with the eruption of the 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. One senior Iranian official talking about the Arab Spring in the context of the U.S.-Iranian rivalry in the region commented, "Bahrain tripped up the Americans, while Syria tripped us up."<sup>vi</sup> This decision not only tarnished the Islamic Republic's reputation in the Middle East, but that of its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, which also backed the Syrian government. Moreover, it had far-reaching consequences for Iran's power and influence in the region as the crisis unfolded in the two years that followed. By 2013, as the conflict in Syria increasingly assumed a sectarian dimension pitting Sunnis against Shi'as in Syria and the Middle East, the prominent Egyptian Sunni cleric, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, called on all Sunnis to join the fight in Syria against Shi'a Iran and Hezbollah – which he referred to as the "Party of Satan."<sup>vii</sup> Others depicted Shi'as as a greater threat to the Arab world than Israel.<sup>viii</sup> The popularity of Iran and Hezbollah, which had peaked in the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon conflict, reached an unprecedented nadir in the Arab-Muslim world due to their steadfast support for the suppression of the Syrian revolt. Furthermore, relations between Tehran and Hamas became strained by the winter of 2011-2012 when the leader of the Palestinian Islamist movement, Khaled Mashal, left Damascus and declared his support for the Syrian opposition.

Tehran initially hoped that by assisting the Ba'athist 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 protests 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 had plenty of experience and had learned valuable lessons in this regard since the violent crackdown against the opponents of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad following the disputed Iranian presidential elections of June 2009. At the same time, according to reports, the Iranians disapproved of the clumsy and heavy-handed approach adopted by the Syrian regime to quell the initial protests. Nonetheless, as the revolt transformed into an armed insurrection, specialist personnel and units from the Iranian security apparatus, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite Quds Force, police, and intelligence, were dispatched and deployed in Syria to assist in defeating armed opposition fighters from the Free Syrian Army and foreign Sunni Islamist groups.<sup>ix</sup> However, their numbers were limited, at most in the hundreds (in the two years that followed), and not in the thousands as opposition sources claimed.

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 about the wisdom of its policy. In order to hedge its bets, Tehran approached some Syrian opposition groups (which were Islamist or did not advocate the toppling of the Assad regime) 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 in 2012.<sup>x</sup>

As the Syrian crisis continued into the autumn and winter of 2011, it increasingly assumed both a regional and an international dimension. A proxy war began to emerge involving 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 weight fully behind the Assad regime. Tehran saw the Syrian crisis as providing its regional rivals with a golden opportunity to deny it of its most valuable ally, and diminish its power and influence in the Middle East. On the international level, the United States and European Union closed ranks to exert pressure and isolate Damascus. Moscow, which had traditionally been the main supplier of weapons to Syria, continued to ship arms to Damascus. Concomitantly, 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. (Both Moscow and Beijing were determined to avoid making the mistake they had made with regard to Libya in 2011 when they voted in favor of UNSC Resolution 1973.) 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'athist regime could pave the way for the emergence of a new regime in Damascus that would be hostile toward Tehran. Consequently, the Iranian leadership made a strategic decision to fully support Assad by providing arms, oil, and financial aid.<sup>xi</sup>

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. In general, Tehran is keen to be part of any multilateral initiative aimed

at ending the current crisis and to have a role in shaping Syria's political future. However, the United States and its allies seem determined to exclude Iran from any negotiated settlement. Iran's interest in a political dialogue and possible diplomatic solution has increased over the past year as the conflict in Syria has dragged on into 2013. Although at present neither the Syrian regime nor the opposition seem to have the ability to deal a knock-out blow, with the passage of time, Bashar al-Assad is losing ground and control of many parts of the country. Large swathes of territory in the north and east of the country are now in the hands of armed groups, including Syrian Kurdish and foreign Islamist militias. Tehran believes that time may not be on the side of the Ba'athist regime, and is looking for options to cut its losses and ensure that irrespective of the outcome of events in Syria, an anti-Iranian government will not come to power in Damascus. Last autumn, Tehran proposed a six-point peace plan to end the crisis. It called for an immediate end to hostilities, the lifting of sanctions, the release of political prisoners, a national dialogue, the formation of a transitional government, and elections for a parliament, constituent assembly, and the presidency.<sup>xii</sup> However, the plan was rejected by the Syrian opposition outright since it did not fulfill one of their key pre-conditions, namely, the removal of Bashar al-Assad from power. More recently, in February, Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi held talks with the head of the Syrian National Coalition, Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, at the global security conference in Munich, Germany to discuss a political solution to the Syrian crisis.<sup>xiii</sup> Concurrently, Iran has continued to provide military assistance to prop up the Assad regime in order to bolster its chances of survival and to strengthen its bargaining position in the event of a substantive political dialogue with its opponents. Tehran is calculating that if the opposition fails to topple the Syrian Ba'athist regime, it may eventually be amenable at the very least to some form of transitional government that contains some elements from the *ancien régime*.

It should be emphasized that with the passage of time, Tehran sees a number of advantages to a negotiated settlement of the Syrian crisis. First, it realizes that the pre-March 2011 political status quo ante cannot be restored. Therefore, it aims to contain the damage and extricate itself, if necessary, in a face-saving manner. Second, it is genuinely concerned that the prolonged fighting in Syria will have a knock-on effect and destabilize Lebanon and Iraq. This could further undermine the position of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the al-Maliki government in Iraq. Third, in view of its growing regional and international isolation due to its stance on the Syrian conflict and the imposition of Western sanctions because of its nuclear program, Iran would like to demonstrate its importance as a key regional actor involved in helping to attain peace in Syria. Fourth, the Islamic Republic is extremely concerned about the growing sectarian polarization and the possible transformation of the conflict into a regional war pitting Sunnis against Shi'as. This would be detrimental to its efforts to export its revolutionary ideology and achieve Muslim unity. Fifth, Tehran knows that it cannot indefinitely provide financial and material support to the Assad regime due to its own economic woes and foreign sanctions. The Islamic Republic's oil revenues have decreased markedly, and its economy has begun to contract for the first time since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Sixth, although not considered an ideal solution, Iran may conclude that in the final analysis, it may be more prudent to facilitate the emergence of a national unity government in Damascus that may not be Tehran's ally, but at minimum will not be its enemy either.

In the event the current war of attrition leads to the overthrow of Assad, Iran has in recent months started to build up a militia force in Syria known as the People's Army (*Al-Jaysh al-*

*Shabi*) consisting of regime loyalists, Alawites, and other groups to ensure that the new regime would not be able to assert control over Syria and would become bogged down. According to reports, the aim is to build up a force which is at least 50,000 strong and ideally grows to 100,000 members.<sup>xiv</sup> Iran wants to have a viable, armed proxy in a post-Assad Syria. In short, Tehran's objective is to ensure if it cannot have Syria as an ally in the Middle East, others should be prevented from instrumentalizing Syria against Iran in the regional power struggle.

Clearly, the current crisis is the greatest challenge facing the 34-year-old Iranian-Syrian alliance. If the Assad government is toppled, this would represent a major setback for Iran. In fact, it would be the most significant defeat 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 has served 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 restored Hezbollah as a formidable force with an arsenal of some 40,000 rockets and missiles.<sup>xv</sup> The overthrow of the Assad regime could transform the regional situation overnight. Not only would Iran lose its most important Arab ally, but its ability to provide support for Hezbollah and to influence the situation in Lebanon and in the Arab-Israeli arena would be severely curtailed. In addition to its importance in advancing Iranian ideological and foreign policy interests in the Levant, from Tehran's vantage point, Hezbollah has become a vital actor to safeguard Iranian national security in recent years since the dispute over Iran's nuclear program emerged. According to Iranian strategic thinking, potential Hezbollah retaliation against Israel serves as a trip wire for U.S. and Israeli military action against Iran.<sup>xvi</sup>

Although the current strategy of trying to prop up the Assad regime is partially aimed at preserving Iran's ability to project its power and influence in the Levant, the strategy also has several key defensive components. Over the past year, tensions in Iraq have increased markedly, and the confrontation between the Shi'a-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad and the Sunni opposition has intensified. Armed Sunni extremist groups have conducted bold attacks against Iraqi civilians and the vestiges of the Iraqi state. The success of the Syrian opposition in seizing control of areas in the east bordering Iraq and their increasing cooperation with Iraqi Sunni insurgents have contributed to the growing instability in Iraq. This has also alarmed policy makers in Tehran. A poignant example recently was the announcement of the alliance between Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Nusra Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*) in Syria. Consequently, there is now a genuine fear in Tehran that if the Assad regime is toppled, it may have a spillover effect in Iraq. This could lead to greater instability and potentially even to the overthrow of the current government in Baghdad and the rise of a Sunni-dominated regime. Iran sees this possibility as completely unacceptable. An alternative scenario is that the Syrian conflict could fuel Sunni secessionist ambitions in Iraq, and lead to the break-up of the country into Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish regions. This would have major security implications for Iran and could produce enormous internal problems, especially in the Kurdish and Arab-inhabited regions of the country bordering Iraq.

It should also be underscored that Iran's reading of the situation in Syria has been influenced by both its own internal developments and relations with the West. Since the protests following the disputed presidential elections of 2009, and the decision of the United States and its European allies (starting in 2010) to impose harsh sanctions on Iran, a sense of embattlement and paranoia has taken hold among Tehran's ruling elites. Any internal opposition or foreign moves that may directly or indirectly threaten either their survival or interests are interpreted as part of a grand strategy or conspiracy to topple the Islamist regime. The failure to resolve differences over Iran's nuclear program through diplomacy – most recently during two rounds of negotiations in Almaty, Kazakhstan – and the continuous imposition of Western sanctions have reinforced Iranian perceptions that Washington's real ultimate goal is regime change in Tehran.

The Iranian leadership has strong suspicions that no matter what it does to allay concerns regarding the nuclear issue, Western sanctions will never again be fully lifted so long as the Islamic Republic continues to exist. As a result, the policies pursued by the United States and its European and Middle Eastern allies with regard to the Syrian crisis have increasingly been interpreted as part of a broader plan to dismantle "the axis of resistance" in the Middle East by toppling the regimes in Damascus and Tehran. Western moves to shun and isolate Iran have therefore reinforced perceptions among policymakers in Tehran that they must take a stand. Iran sees Syria as the first line of defense against a concerted effort by its regional and extra-regional foes not only to bring about regime change in Damascus and the end of its alliance with Tehran, but as part of a longer-term strategy to isolate and overthrow the Islamic Republic.

At present, Tehran fears the emergence of a crescent of pro-Western (Sunni) regimes stretching from Turkey to Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The nightmare scenario for Iran would be for the Syrian Ba'athist regime to be replaced by a Sunni fundamentalist regime that is staunchly anti-Iran and anti-Shia, and closely allied with Tehran's regional rival, Saudi Arabia. However, "the mother of all nightmares" for Iran would be if both of the existing regimes in Damascus and Baghdad were toppled and succeeded by governments that are implacably hostile toward Tehran. To date, Iran has done all it can to ensure that Bashar al-Assad will not be toppled by pouring in men, material, and money to bolster his position. In spite of its tremendous efforts and spending billions of dollars to prop up the Syrian regime, the outcome is still unclear. In fact, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and a number of politicians and members of parliament (*majlis*) have expressed disappointment about the results in the past.<sup>xvii</sup>

In conclusion, to date, the Arab Spring has not translated into a net gain for Iran. While relations between Tehran and the new governments in Cairo, Tripoli, and Tunis have thawed, normalization, especially with Egypt, remains elusive. This can be attributed in part to the continued political instability in Egypt, but also to the fact that Iran and Egypt have stood on opposite sides of the fence in the Syrian conflict. Their contrasting positions have impeded the political reconciliation process and accentuated the Sunni-Shi'a schism.<sup>xviii</sup> In addition, Tehran and its regional allies have lost a great deal of the political capital they possessed in the Arab-Muslim world due to their steadfast support for the Assad regime and its brutal suppression of the uprising. There is no doubt that the alliance between Iran and Syria is now at a critical crossroads, and its days may be numbered. Whatever the outcome, one thing is for certain: the relationship cannot be restored to its pre-2011 status.

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*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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<sup>i</sup> Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 1-2.

<sup>ii</sup> See Graham E. Fuller, *The Center of the Universe: The Geopolitics of Iran* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press/Rand Corporation, 1991).

<sup>iii</sup> For more details, see Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London, England: I.B. Tauris, 2009), Chapter 1, 2 and 4.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>v</sup> See Meris Lutz, "Iran's Supreme Leader Calls Uprising an 'Islamic Awakening'," *The Los Angeles Times*, 4 February 2011.

<sup>vi</sup> Confidential conversation with a senior Iranian official, Geneva, Switzerland, March 2012.

<sup>vii</sup> See BBC News Middle East, "Syria Conflict: Cleric Qaradawi Urges Sunnis to Join Rebels," 1 June 2013.

<sup>viii</sup> See Sam Dagher, "Arab Media Clash Over Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 March 2012.

<sup>ix</sup> For details, see David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011), 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.

<sup>x</sup> See Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (International Institute for Strategic Studies: London, 2013), p. 124 and Najmeh Bozorgmehr and Monavar Khalaj, "Transcript: Interview with Ali Larijani," *The Financial Times*, 19 September 2012.

<sup>xi</sup> See *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 2012, and Lina Saigol, "Iran Helps Syria Defy Oil Embargo," *The Financial Times*, 18 May 2012.

<sup>xii</sup> "Iran Unveils Six-Point Peace Plan for Syria," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 19 December 2012.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Julian Borger, "Russia and Iran meet Syrian Opposition Leader," *The Guardian*, 3 February 2013.

<sup>xiv</sup> Karen De Young and Joby Warrick, "Iran and Hezbollah Build Militia Networks in Syria in Event That Assad Falls, Officials Say," *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2013.

<sup>xv</sup> 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.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Radicalism or Realpolitik?: The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Babylon: The Nordic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 8, Number 2, 2010, p. 88 and Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, p. xiv.

<sup>xvii</sup> For a recent example, see Hugh Tomlinson, "Tehran Split Over Billions Spent by Spy Chief to Prop Up Assad Regime," *The Times of London*, 1 October 2012.

<sup>xviii</sup> See "Morsi's Ouster Unlikely to Affect Egypt's Ties with Iran," *Mehr News Agency*, 15 July 2013.



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