

## Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)

When the Arab Spring reached the Mediterranean shores of Syria in early 2011, there was an ephemeral exuberance that Bashar Assad's dictatorship would be replaced with a democratic order. Today, Syria has descended into an existential civil war among religious sects and ethnic communities. The country has transformed into a battleground for a proxy war among regional and global powers that pursue irreconcilable objectives. Balkanization of Syria appears underway as the government, the Kurds, and the opposition to President Bashar Assad's regime control different swaths of the country, while the civil war has ominously metastasized to Syria's neighbors. Alarming, a large number of foreign-born jihadists and terrorists with possible links to al-Qaeda have also flooded the country to foment mischief. Amidst all the destruction, the complex civil war has reached a stubborn stalemate with no breakthrough in sight.

One of the key players in the lingering crisis is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Throughout the past 33 years, Iran has been the most stalwart supporter of Assad's regime. The question is, how far will the Islamic Republic go to protect the repressive house the Assads—Hafez and Bashar—have built?

### The Early Years of an Alliance

---

The genesis of the Iranian–Syrian alliance goes back to 1979, when the Middle East's strategic landscape radically changed with the Iranian Revolution. At the time, President Hafez Assad (1971–2000) felt vulnerable but optimistic.<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty had terminated his strategic partnership with Egypt, and Iraq had become increasingly antagonistic. Still, he saw in Iran's revolution a formidable counterforce against Iraq and Israel, his nemeses. He was eager enough to grow ties

---

Mohsen Milani is a professor of politics and the Executive Director of USF World's Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies at the University of South Florida. Follow him on Tweeter @MohsenMilani, and email him at Milani@usf.edu. The author is grateful to Beth Beall, Eric Wolters, and Hiva Fiezi for their assistance.

---

Copyright © 2013 Center for Strategic and International Studies  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 36:4 pp. 79–93  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.861715>

with Iran that he sent Ayatollah Khomeini a gold-illuminated Koran and a pledge of cooperation in 1979.

Khomeini reciprocated. He looked at Syria as a bridge for empowering the Shi'as of southern Lebanon. That region had a unique significance for Khomeini and Shi'a revolutionaries: it was from southern Lebanon in the early fourteenth century that Persian kings imported clerics to spread Shi'ism in the then-predominantly Sunni Iran. Dr. Mostafa Chamran (1932–1981), former Defense Minister and a key founder of the Revolutionary Guards, revered southern Lebanon as “the holiest outpost of Shi'ism in the world” that must be protected at any price.<sup>2</sup> Having fought in Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s, he was part of the “Syria Mafia” among Khomeini advisors who advocated strategic alliance with Assad to establish a foothold in southern Lebanon.

The Syria Mafia needed little lobbying to push its agenda. After the November 1979 Teheran hostage crisis, Khomeini ended Iran's strategic alliance with the United States, and made anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli policies the cornerstone of his foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> A Pan-Islamist, he sought to gain strategic depth against Israel inside Lebanon and Syria, and exploit it to export his revolution and support Palestinians. After Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, Khomeini added Iraq to the list of enemies. It was this shared perception of threat from, and animosity toward, Israel, Iraq, and the United States that initially pushed Syria and Iran toward political alliance. That the Alawites, the minority sect Assad belonged to, are an off-shoot of Shi'ism, the state religion in Iran, cemented the alliance.

The impact of the new Syrian–Iranian alliance was most visible in Iraq and Lebanon. Assad was the sole major Arab leader that broke ranks with his Arab brethren and supported Iran during the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s. As a member of the Arab League, Syria prevented the formation of an anti-Iran front by the Arab countries. He also shut down Iraqi oil pipelines that went through Syria, precipitating substantial reductions in Iraq's revenues.

Iran, too, supported Assad. According to Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, former ambassador to Syria (1982–1986), Iran annually provided Syria with one million barrels of free oil for its army, and eight million barrels at \$2.50 below the market price, which amounted to a major financial contribution to Syria.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when the Assad regime massacred the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (who received support from Iraq) in the city of Hama in February 1982, Khomeini mildly condemned the massacre without changing Iran's policy towards Syria. He simply did not wish to antagonize Assad.

Syria, seeking to prevent Iraq from winning the war, also provided military assistance to Iran during the Iraq–Iran war. While Iraq freely acquired weapons from the Eastern and Western blocs, the U.S. arms embargo prevented Tehran from purchasing new weapons and spare parts for its U.S.-made weapon systems. Syria became a lifeline for Iran to bypass the embargo. Mohsen Rafiqdust, Minister of the Revolutionary Guards from 1982–89, writes that “Damascus was transformed into the transit center for transportation of weapons to Iran.” In fact, Assad had designated “a warehouse at the Damascus airport for us to store everything we had bought,” including weapons from the Eastern bloc that Iran had purchased under the Syrian name. Rafiqdust does not reveal what kind of weapons Iran obtained. He does indicate, however, that Assad was asked but refused to provide Iran with missiles. Instead, Assad “agreed to train some 40-50

Iranians about missile technologies." Eventually, Assad provided Iran with "a number of Scud B missiles in 1986–88."<sup>5</sup>

It was in Lebanon where Iran and Syria collaborated most closely. Hezbollah is the child of that collaboration. In 1981, a year after Iraq invaded Iran, a group of young Lebanese Shi'as visited with Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran. Among them was the 21-year-old Hassan Nasrallah, the present-day Secretary General of Hezbollah. At that meeting, Khomeini approved the creation of a new organization in Lebanon, even though a large Shi'a organization, the Amal Movement, already existed there. The problem was that the Amal Movement's spiritual leader, Imam Musa Sadr, was a moderate Iranian cleric who rejected Khomeini's doctrine of direct involvement of clerics in politics (*Velayat-e Faqih*). (Sadr also reportedly issued a fatwa that recognized the Alawites, historically denounced as heretics, as a legitimate offshoot of Shi'a Islam. He mysteriously disappeared in 1978 on the way to Libya and became a legendary figure among Lebanese Shi'as.)<sup>6</sup> Khomeini was determined to create a subservient organization that advocated direct rule by the clerics. To achieve that goal, he authorized Nasrallah to collect tithes on his behalf and to lay the foundation for creating a new organization. He also appointed Shiekhollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, the present Supreme Leader, as his special representative with full authority to supervise the creation of this new organization, which is now known as Hezbollah.<sup>7</sup> Years later, Nasrallah recalled that Iran "offered Lebanon everything in its power: money, training, and advice."<sup>8</sup>

Israel's incursion into Lebanon (Operation Peace for Galilee) in June 1982, during the Lebanese civil war, strengthened the Syrian–Iranian cooperation and expedited the creation of Hezbollah. Shortly after the invasion, recalls Mohtashemi, a delegation from Iran met with Assad and informed him that Iran was prepared to send limited troops to "fight against Israel in a front to be determined by the Syrian army."<sup>9</sup> Assad rejected this reckless offer, but allowed Iran to send 500 Revolutionary Guards to Damascus and from there to the Bekka Valley in Lebanon to train and arm the Shi'as.<sup>10</sup> There, the Revolutionary Guards helped establish Hezbollah. The organization quickly gained notoriety when it reportedly carried out the 1983 U.S. barracks bombings in Beirut, killing 241 U.S. servicemen.

Both Iran and Syria used Hezbollah to enhance their interests. Through Hezbollah, Iran established a foothold in Lebanon and began to develop retaliatory capability against Israel, and also became entangled in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Syria exploited a dependent Hezbollah both to enhance its irredentist ambitions in Lebanon and agitate Israel.

By the time the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990, Hezbollah had evolved into a powerful military, political, and economic force: it provided social services, participated in elections, and had members in Lebanon's parliament and the cabinet.<sup>11</sup> It also expanded its global reach, committing acts of terrorism against Israeli and Western interests. Hezbollah had practically become a "state within the state" in Lebanon, similar to the "state within the state" Ayatollah Khomeini had established in Iran immediately after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1979.<sup>12</sup>

The political alliance between Syria and Iran under Hafez Assad's rule sustained itself through a shared perception of threat, a convergence of interests in Lebanon and Iraq, and a common perspective regarding Palestine, Israel, and the United States. (Assad, unlike Iran, was cautious not to openly antagonize Washington.) At the same

time, the political and economic relationship between the two countries improved significantly. The two countries collaborated on many issues as equal partners and successfully resolved their occasional disagreements. Assad, however, disallowed Iran from interfering in Syrian domestic affairs. He deftly kept a delicate equilibrium between the interests of Iran and Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, and remained fiercely independent. For example, having supported Iran during the Iraq–Iran war, Assad, much to Iran’s chagrin and to the pleasure of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, joined the U.S.-led coalition of Operation Desert Storm (1990–91) to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

Despite these difficulties, the Iran–Syria relationship remained strong. During Hafez Assad’s rule, Iran realized its strategy of establishing a viable foothold against Israel at the heart of the Arab world and of empowering Lebanese Shi’as.

### **The Alliance Becomes Strategic**

---

After Hafez Assad died in June 2000 and his young son, Bashar, became president, the political alliance between Syria and Iran gradually became strategic, and the military and intelligence cooperation between them increased substantially. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005 after the “Cedar Revolution,” and the 34-day Israel–Hezbollah war in 2006 solidified the Syria–Iran alliance. However, Bashar, unlike his crafty father, was unable to maintain equilibrium between the interests of Iran and the Arabs, particularly Saudi Arabia, and became a target of their wrath.<sup>13</sup> Nor could he maintain the relatively good relations his father had developed with the West. The closer he moved toward Iran, the further he moved away from most Arab countries and the West.<sup>14</sup>

The toppling of Saddam’s Sunni-dominated government in Iraq in 2003 by U.S. troops and its eventual replacement with a Tehran-friendly, Shi’a-dominated government was a strategic gift to Iran that, among other things, opened the Levant to Iran through Iraqi soil. But the invasion also ignited a sectarian war between Sunnis and Shi’as, turning Iraq into a breeding ground for Salafi, Wahabi, and Jihadi groups, whose hatred of Shi’ism was no less intense than their aversion toward the United States.<sup>15</sup> Iran continues to spend a considerable amount of its resources and treasury to fight against these hostile groups. Moreover, the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq made Syria and Iran fear that the United States could easily attack them, particularly if the U.S. emerged victorious in Iraq. Despite their disagreements over Iraq, Syria and Iran bloodied the United States and made its occupation as painful as possible. Thus, as Iran trained and supported various Shi’a militias to kill U.S. troops, Syria allowed terrorists to cross its borders to achieve the same goal.<sup>16</sup>

Saudi Arabia, which supported some elements of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, was utterly dismayed by the growing influence of Iran and the loss of Iraq as an ally against Persian expansion eastward.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the loss of Iraq was the single greatest strategic setback for Saudi Arabia in decades. However, Saudi Arabia and its allies found a new opportunity in Lebanon to weaken Iran and its allies, Syria and Hezbollah. That opportunity ironically presented itself after the February 2005 assassination of Rafik Harriri, the Lebanese prime minister and a close ally of Saudi Arabia. This act of terrorism gave birth to the “Cedar Revolution” that demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Whereas historically the main opposition to Syria in Lebanon had

come from Christians, this time the Sunnis, backed by Saudi Arabia, joined the anti-Syrian forces. Hezbollah and Iran, of course, steadfastly supported Syria. Lebanon thus turned into the main battleground for a proxy war waged by Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Under international pressure, Syria reluctantly withdrew its 18,000 troops and intelligence officers from Lebanon in April 2005. The humiliation of “losing Lebanon” and the sense of betrayal Assad felt from the Arab countries that had joined the West to demand the expulsion of Syrian troops from Lebanon was a game-changer for Assad. Isolated and angry, he moved even closer to Hezbollah and Iran. The allegation that Syria and Hezbollah masterminded the assassination—and the subsequent investigation by the United Nations—pushed Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah even closer, forcing them into a defensive posture.

The alliance among Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah reached its zenith after the 34-day Israeli–Hezbollah war of 2006. The war began in reaction to Hezbollah’s reckless kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. Israel’s stated goals were to secure the release of the two prisoners and destroy Hezbollah’s military capability. Hezbollah employed its asymmetrical strategies and fought until a UN resolution called for ending the war and disarming Hezbollah. The war ended, but Hezbollah was never disarmed. The economic damage to Lebanon was staggering and the death tolls saw an asymmetry, with Israel losing 119 soldiers and Lebanon losing more than 1,000 people. Nasrallah admits that much of the reconstruction of southern Lebanon “has been achieved through Iranian money.”

This was the first time in the tortured history of the Arab–Israeli conflict that an Arab force had not decisively and quickly lost to Israel. In fact, Hezbollah claimed victory, a claim supported by some pundits as well.<sup>18</sup> Its clout in the Islamic world reached a new height. The conclusions by the Winograd Committee, established by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (2006–2009), that “[t]he war was a big and serious failure” and Israel’s diplomatic efforts “to stop a war which it has failed to win” made Nasrallah the most popular Arab leader and an icon of opposition against Israel.<sup>19</sup> Thereafter, Hezbollah’s power increased while it continued to receive weapons from Iran through Syria.

Before the start of the Arab Spring in December 2010, the alliance among Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah was strong and popular. This so-called “Axis of Resistance” took its ideological basis from the narrative of “resistance” against the United States and Israel.<sup>20</sup> The triple alliance had given Iran strategic depth at the heart of the Arab world, with limited retaliatory capability against Israel. In fact, Tehran had established what I call a “Corridor of Resistance,” covering Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon—a distance of some 1,500 miles.

The power of the triple alliance was on display when, in January 2011, just one month after the start of the Arab Spring, Hezbollah and its allies withdrew from the cabinet in Lebanon. This precipitated the collapse of the government, headed by Prime Minister Saeed Hariri, an ally of Saudi Arabia and the son of Rafik Hariri. Six months later, Hariri resigned under pressure and was replaced by Najib Mikati, who was friendly to Iran and Syria. Riyadh and its Western and Arab allies could not have been more alarmed about the rise of Iran as a regional power and its alliance with Syria and Hezbollah. Ironically, the Arab Spring, which Saudi Arabia had strongly opposed from

its inception, soon provided that country and its allies with a great opportunity to undermine Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah.

## The Arab Spring Reaches Syria

**By supporting Assad, Iran has fallen into a trap from which it cannot escape without substantial costs.**

Iran enthusiastically supported the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain, dubbing them as the “Islamic Awakening” inspired by its own Islamic revolution. However, when the Arab Spring reached Syria around July 2011, Iran changed course. Although the Syrian uprising was at first peaceful and democratic, Tehran impetuously condemned it as a conspiracy concocted by the United States and Israel to overthrow Assad and destroy the Axis of Resistance. Tehran was confident that Assad’s notorious *mukhabarat* would handily suppress the uprising. But by supporting Assad, Iran has fallen

into a trap from which it cannot escape without substantial political and economic costs.

At the beginning of the Syrian uprising, there were moderate voices in Iran who called for a policy change toward Damascus. They maintained that Assad was devoid of legitimacy because of his ruthless suppression of the people, and urged Tehran to gradually distance itself from Assad’s regime and instead support the uprising. They also maintained that Iran had no vital national interests in Syria, and that backing Assad would place Iran on the wrong side of history, exposing its hypocrisy for supporting every other Arab uprising but Syria’s.<sup>21</sup>

The hardliners, who controlled Iranian foreign policy until Hassan Rouhani won the presidential election in June 2013, believed that supporting Assad in his hour of desperation was a moral responsibility as well as a national security imperative. They argued that Assad’s legitimacy emanated from his vociferous opposition to the United States and Israel, as well as from his support for the Palestinians and the resistance. They linked Syria to Iranian national security interests, arguing that a hostile government in Damascus would make it easier for Israel to attack Hezbollah and then Iran. Ali Akbar Velayati, former Foreign Minister of Iran and a senior advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei, declared that “Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel” that must be protected.<sup>22</sup> One influential cleric even made the outrageous claim that Syria has a greater strategic significance for the Islamic Republic than Iran’s own oil-rich province of Khuzestan.<sup>23</sup>

From the beginning, Ayatollah Khamenei was remarkably resolute in his support for Assad. In fact, for years he has personally been engaged in formulating Iran’s Levant strategy. Shortly after he became Supreme Leader in 1989, Nasrallah asked him if he would like to have a personal representative to manage Iran’s involvement in the Levant, as Khomeini had done previously. Khamenei emphatically said no, reminding him that he was “responsible for Israel and Lebanon.”<sup>24</sup>

To appreciate Khamenei's approach toward the Syrian crisis, it is valuable to consider three points about his outlook and *modus operandi*. First, the big prize for him is Hezbollah, not Syria—Syria is important because of the role it plays in empowering Hezbollah. Moreover, Khamenei is more popular in Lebanon than anywhere else in the Islamic world. In fact, he is the “source of emulation” for many Lebanese Shi'as, who follow his religious and political decrees. Therefore, he is willing to generously spend his resources to protect Hezbollah and, by extension, Syria. Second, he is resistant to changing his strategy under pressure. “Iran must respond to force and threats with its own force and threats,” he once said. This explains why he has consistently urged Assad not to capitulate. Finally, he seems to believe that if Assad is overthrown, it would embolden the United States to engineer regime change in Tehran. For him, if one part of the Syria–Iran–Hezbollah alliance is weakened or destroyed, the other two would irrevocably suffer. Assad seems to have the same mindset. Nasrallah recalls that, after the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war, Assad told him that had Israel succeeded in eliminating Hezbollah, then “the battle would have dragged to Syria.”<sup>25</sup>

**The big prize for Khamenei is Hezbollah, not Syria.**

### Iran's Multi-Dimensional Strategy

Although the nature and dynamics of the Syrian crisis have changed in the past three years, Iran's strategic goal of protecting the Assad regime has not.<sup>26</sup> For Tehran, the survival of Assad is the most favorable outcome of the ongoing crisis. In such a case, a weakened Assad would be indebted to Iran for its uncompromising support. The next best outcome would be “Assadism” without Assad. In that case, Assad would relinquish power, but the structure and composition of the security and armed forces would more or less remain intact, with the Alawites sharing power with some moderate and non-Jihadist elements of the opposition to Assad. This scenario resembles the current situation in Yemen and Egypt, where the military and security forces have retained their power despite massive popular uprisings and major changes in the top civilian leadership. Finally, Iran's nightmare, and its red line, is regime change in Syria—a fundamental change in the personnel and orientation of the government as well as its military and security forces. This would be the single greatest strategic setback for Iran since the founding of the Islamic Republic. In that case, it is speculated that Iran would seek to create an independent Alawite state.<sup>27</sup>

Iran has developed a multi-faceted strategy to protect Assad and his regime, secure Iran's interests in Syria, and defend Hezbollah in Lebanon. The first element of this strategy is to provide direct military assistance to Assad. At first, Iran's Revolutionary Guards provided him with technical and intelligence support to suppress the uprising, including crowd control techniques and technologies to interrupt social networking and the Internet. The Islamic Republic shared with him what it had learned in suppressing its own Green Movement, which had emerged in reaction to the disputed presidential election in June 2009. As the opposition to Assad became increasingly armed and violent and as the country plunged into a civil war, Iran began to send weapons and advisors to the Syrian government to ensure it did not lose the civil war. Iran, with the

support from Iraq's Maliki government, has used Iraqi airspace to provide equipment and personnel to strengthen the Syrian government.<sup>28</sup> Iraq, like Iran, is alarmed by the growing power of Jihadists in Syria.

In August 2012, the Syrian rebels captured 48 Iranians inside Syria, claiming they were members of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards; Iran denied the charge. Ultimately, Assad released more than 2,000 incarcerated rebels in exchange for the release of the Iranian prisoners: this only increased suspicions that the Iranians were members of the Quds Force.<sup>29</sup> Iranian military support to Assad has been a key factor to his survival. General James Mattis, the Commander of U.S. Central Command until March 2013, argues that without the Iranian aid "the Assad Regime would have collapsed months ago."<sup>30</sup>

As Iran increased its military assistance and intervention in Syria, it also warned against any foreign military intervention in that country, which the Syrian opposition had demanded. Ali Akbar Salehi, former Iranian Foreign Minister, warned that in case of an intervention "NATO will be drawn into a quagmire, which it will never be able to extricate itself from."<sup>31</sup> Iran warned that any military intervention would further spread sectarian conflict to Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and even Turkey.

## Tehran made a tactical change around 2012 in its diplomatic overtures toward Assad.

The second element of Iran's strategy toward Syria is to find a political solution to the Syrian civil war while protecting Assad and his regime. At the beginning of the uprising, Iran urged Assad to suppress his opponents, but with the growing popularity of the uprising, Tehran made a tactical change around 2012 in its diplomatic overtures towards Assad. Tehran began to publically urge Assad to implement reforms and negotiate with the "legitimate" opposition forces. President Ahmadinejad, for example, declared that [t]he people and government of Syria must come together to reach an understanding... away from

violence... [O]ne "must not kill the other."<sup>32</sup> Tehran even urged Assad to negotiate with the Muslim Brotherhood.

In December 2012, Iran unveiled its own six-point peace plan for Syria. Among other things, it called for an immediate cessation of violence, humanitarian aid for the Syrian people once the violence ended, lifting of sanctions against Syria, and assisting Syrian refugees to return to their homes. Syrian opposition forces immediately rejected the proposal.

The third element of Iran's Syrian strategy is to establish a pro-Assad international front while preventing neutral countries from joining the broad international coalition against the Syrian leader. On the regional level, Iran has pressured Iraq to support the Assad regime, even though Assad allowed Jihadists to cross the Syrian border to fight against the Iraqi government during the American occupation of Iraq. Iran did not have to do much lobbying to convince Iraq of the dangers of the Syrian civil war to its own sovereignty. In the last two years, the sectarian civil war in Syria has metastasized to Iraq, as Jihadist organizations from Iraq and Syria have increasingly coordinated their activities. In fact, Iraq has seen a substantial increase in the number of sectarian deaths in the past two years.

Most importantly, Iran has moved ever closer to Russia to coordinate its Syrian policy. Together, they are the principal backers of the Assad regime. Even while the West continues to impose crippling sanctions on Iran for its nuclear policies, the Supreme National Security Council of Iran signed an important document with its Russian counterpart to have cooperation in “security, economic, political, and intelligent spheres.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Russia and Iran share many common goals and concerns in Syria. They both oppose regime change. They both believe that there are no viable military solutions to end the civil war, and that negotiation between the government and its opponents is the only path leading to peace. They both oppose Western or UN-sponsored military intervention in Syria. They both are concerned about the growth of Salafi and Wahhabi movements in Syria, and they both urge Assad to implement reforms.

The fourth element of Iran's strategy toward Syria is to provide economic support to Syria and protect and enhance its own interests. The economic relationship between Iran and Syria has never been the driving force of their alliance. Exports from Iran to Syria, for instance, increased from \$35.7 million in 2000 to \$387.4 million in 2010. Despite this huge increase, Iran's export to Syria was only .28 percent of Iran's total exports. Exports from Syria to Iran during the same timespan increased from \$1.4 million to \$29.2 million, which was .38 percent of the total Syrian exports.<sup>34</sup> (These numbers do not include military transfers between the two countries, for which we do not have accurate information.) Syria and Iran are, however, increasing their economic relationship. In July 2013, the two nations signed an agreement in which the Iranian Central Bank pledged to provide its Syrian counterpart with a \$3.6 billion line of credit to purchase Iranian oil in exchange for allowing Iran to invest the equivalent amount in Syria.<sup>35</sup>

Most importantly, Iran, Iraq, and Syria signed an agreement in July 2013 to build a massive gas pipeline from the Iranian Pars gas fields through Iraq, across Syria, and to the Mediterranean and Lebanon. The project, the Iran–Iraq–Syria Friendship Pipeline, stretches some 5,600 kilometers with an estimated cost of \$10 billion.<sup>36</sup> The pipeline would allow Iran, which has the world's second-largest reserves of natural gas, access to European markets via the Mediterranean Sea, and it would supply Syria, Lebanon, and even Jordan with natural gas for power generation. Qatar, one of the key supporters of the Syrian rebels, opposes the construction of this so-called “Shi'a Crescent Pipeline,” and would instead prefer a route through Saudi Arabia and the Gulf of Aqaba to the Gulf of Suez and Syria, Turkey, and the Mediterranean Sea.

The fifth, and preemptive, element of Iran's Syrian strategy is to fortify Iran's position in Lebanon and establish a new source of power there, independent of Hezbollah, in case of Assad's collapse. Iran's former Defense Minister, Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi, declared that strengthening Lebanon's army is one of the strategic objectives of the Islamic Republic.<sup>37</sup> It was with that objective in mind that Mohammad Reza Rahimi, Iran's first vice president, visited Lebanon in 2012, accompanied by 100 people and with proposals for twelve developmental projects. For example, Iran offered to build a hydroelectric dam in Tannourine, at the heart of the Christian section of Lebanon.<sup>38</sup>

The final and perhaps the most important element of Iran's strategy toward Syria is Hezbollah's unconditional support for the Assad regime and its direct intervention in Syria. There were credible reports suggesting Hezbollah's direct intervention in Syria after the start of the uprising, which Hezbollah initially denied. Today, Hezbollah openly admits its intervention. The group's involvement in the battle of al-Qaysar in Syria in

early 2013 sent the message that it will go as far as necessary to protect Assad. After the August 2013 bombing of a building in Lebanon that belonged to Hezbollah, Nasrallah said, “A response to any such bombing is that we will double our fighters in Syria. If before the attacks we had 100 fighters in Syria, after these attacks we will have 200.” He even said, “I will go myself to Syria if it is so necessary in the battle against the Takfiris.”<sup>39</sup> Hezbollah, along with Iran, has reportedly supported the formation of militia networks and “the popular committees,” or local defense forces, to defeat the rebels.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, Iran and Hezbollah closely coordinate their military activities in Syria.

Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria is also designed to defeat new Jihadist and extremist elements, such as the al-Nusra Front which is estimated to have between six or seven thousand fighters. A new umbrella group, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, has also attracted fighters from Chechnya, Pakistan, Egypt, and the West. The commander of the group is Abu Omar, a Syrian who believes, like other Jihadists, that there must be a broad-based coalition against “Shi’ite-led Iran and its quest to dominate the region.” He says, “We have one enemy”: Iran.<sup>41</sup>

By the middle of 2013, Assad—with support from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia—had not only managed to survive, but had somewhat gained the upper hand in the civil war. The civil war reached a critical point when the United States accused the Syrian government of using chemical weapons against its own people and threatened to intervene militarily. Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Russia opposed any military intervention, while France, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey supported it. Ultimately, President Obama decided not to intervene when Russia and the United States reached an agreement to dismantle Syria’s chemical weapons.<sup>42</sup> Iran claims to have supported such disarmament from the very beginning. Assad unhesitatingly accepted the Russian–U.S. proposal and agreed to allow international inspectors to go to Syria to dismantle his chemical weapons. The agreement was a victory for Iran and Russia, as it gave Assad a new lease in life. Any military intervention by the United States would also have practically made it very difficult, if not impossible, for President Rouhani to pursue his rapprochement with the United States.

### Why Tehran Won’t Abandon Assad(ism)

For Tehran, Syria is a major front in its geostrategic competition with the United States, its cold war with Saudi Arabia, and its war against the Salafi, Wahhabi, and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups whose hatred of Shi’ism is seen as a grave menace to that faith. Iran has

**T**ehran sees Syria as the bedrock of the 1,600-mile “Corridor of Resistance.”

paid dearly to sustain its three-decade long alliance with Syria, and its most precious asset of the Lebanese Hezbollah. Tehran sees Syria as the bedrock of the 1,600-mile “Corridor of Resistance”—which stretches from Harat in Afghanistan to Iraq to Lebanon to Syria—that it has built against the United States and Israel. (With a Shi’a-dominated government in Baghdad, the strategic significance of Syria for Iran has arguably been diminished.) In the regional game of political chess played by Iran and the United States, Hezbollah is

Iran’s “king.” Tehran perceives the collapse of the Assad regime as an inauspicious move that could checkmate Hezbollah and the Islamic Republic. This is why the Islamic

Republic will fight to a bitter end to protect the Syrian regime, with or without Assad. Rouhani's moderate government can change some aspects of Iran's Syrian policy, but it cannot change it fundamentally.

It is no secret that Washington and its regional allies have been seeking to break up the Iranian-Syrian alliance, weaken Hezbollah, and reverse Iran's rise as a regional power. Assad's downfall is seen as a shortcut to realize these goals. Israel's former Mossad director, Mr. Efraim Halevy, has opined that as "Assad's government falters, Syria is becoming Iran's Achilles' heels."<sup>43</sup> Had the Assad regime quickly collapsed, it could have been a huge strategic debacle for Iran. In such a case, Iran would have become more aggressive in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Bahrain to compensate for the "loss of Syria."

The longevity of the civil war, however, has been a priceless gift to Tehran. It has allowed Iran to provide multi-faceted assistance to Assad and implement in Syria its asymmetric strategies and militia-building capability, which it perfected on the battlegrounds in Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It has given Iran time to expand its influence in Lebanon to minimize its potential losses should Assad fall. It also allowed Iran to pressure a reluctant Iraqi government to support Assad, and coordinate its policy with Russia. Even Hamas, which switched sides and supported the opposition, is now seeking to reestablish its good relationship with the Islamic Republic.

Today, Syria has become the center of gravity for an assorted array of Jihadist and terrorist organizations, some of which are al-Qaeda affiliates. It is estimated that there are somewhere between 15,000- 35,000 such elements in Syria. In fact, these groups have been effective fighters against Assad. If Assad falls, it is very unlikely that these Jihadist and terrorist organizations will leave Syria. They will likely challenge any post-Assad government to impose their rule. The fall of Assad, therefore, would not be the end of the Syrian civil war. It could very well represent the beginning of a more bloody sectarian conflict that would metastasize to the entire region.

Ironically, both Iran and the United States share the common strategic objective of eliminating these extremist groups and ensuring that the Syrian state does not totally collapse. A collapse would create a huge security vacuum that terrorists could easily exploit. These two shared objectives could become the basis of limited cooperation between Iran and the United States, particularly after the election of President Hassan Rouhani.

Rouhani has promised to bring moderation and pragmatism to Iranian foreign policy.<sup>44</sup> He seeks to find a peaceful and honorable resolution to Iran's nuclear impasse with the West, and has expressed enthusiastic willingness to start serious bilateral talks with the United States. The brief telephone conversation between Presidents Rouhani

**The Islamic Republic will fight to a bitter end to protect the Syrian regime, with or without Assad.**

**The fall of Assad would not be the end of the Syrian civil war.**

## Two shared objectives could become the basis of limited cooperation between Iran and the U.S.

and Obama in the last day of Rouhani's visit to the UN in New York in September 2013 was the first time the leaders of the two countries have spoken since the monarchy in Iran was demolished in 1979.<sup>45</sup> It opened a new chapter in the U.S.–Iran relationship.

Although it is unlikely that Rouhani will change Iran's Syria strategy entirely, his administration is likely to be more flexible about the future of Assad's regime than its predecessor. For one thing, Iran's reaction to a possible military strike against Syria was uncharacteristically taciturn, given that Iran had previously declared that attack on Syria would constitute an attack on Iran. Iran

also played an important role in convincing Assad in September 2013 to agree with the U.S.–Russian agreement to disarm Syria of its chemical weapons.

There are powerful indications that some elements in Iran's foreign policy circles have called for a change in Iran's support for Assad. Iran, having been a victim of chemical weapons used by Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq war, condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria but did not explicitly blame the Syrian government. On one occasion, Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, Chair of the Expediency Council, explicitly blamed the Syrian government for using chemical weapons against its own people—but under pressure from conservative elements, he later denied having made the allegation. Clearly, Rafsanjani hoped to convince the Islamic Republic leadership to distance itself from Assad's brutal regime.

More than two years of death and destruction has proven that there is no military solution to the lingering civil war in Syria. The only path to stability and peace in that troubled and devastated country is through negotiations between the government and the opposition. Iran has certainly been part of the problem in Syria, but the Rouhani government offers the West the best opportunity since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to establish a *détente*. By inviting Iran to the U.S.–Russian Geneva II Conference, we will know whether Iran can now become part of the solution to the Syrian crisis. Rouhani has promised moderation in Iranian foreign policy—soon we shall see if this claim of moderation is rhetorical or real.

### Notes

1. Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006); Anoushervan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
2. Mohammad Ghoshani, "Unity of Iranian and Lebanese Shi'as," *Sharg*, July 27, 2006. <http://sharghnewspaper.ir/850505/html/index.htm>.
3. Mohsen Milani, "Teheran's Take: Understanding Iran's U.S. Policy," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2009), pp. 42–62, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65123/mohsen-milani/tehrans-take>.
4. Ghoshani, "Unity of Iranian and Lebanese Shi'as," p. 3.
5. All the information about Mohsen Rafiqdust in this paragraph is from "Syrian support for Iran at war," [in Persian], <http://defamoghadas-1.blogfa.com/post/9>, and Pars News, [in Persian], <http://www.farsnews.com/printable/php?nn=13910509000704>.

6. See Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Cornell University Press, 1987).
7. "Wonders of Lebanese Hezbollah in a Nassarollah's Unannounced Meeting," [in Persian], *Baztab*, August 21, 2006, <http://www.baztab.ir/news/46103.php>.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Ghoshani, "Unity of Iranian and Lebanese Shi'as." Op. cit.
10. *Ibid.*
11. For the most authoritative history of Hezbollah, see Richard Augustus Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2009).
12. Mohsen Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp.147–151.
13. For Syrian–Saudi relations, see Sonoko Sunayama, *Syria and Saudi Arabia: Collaboration and Conflict in the Oil Era* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007).
14. For an interesting analysis of presidents Ahmadinejad and Assad and their views regarding the conflict with the United States, see Akan Malici and Allison L. Buckner, "Empathizing with Rogue Leaders: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Assad," *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 6 (2008): 783–800.
15. For a prescient analysis of sectarian conflicts in the Middle East, see Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).
16. For more on this issue, see Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Policy toward Post-Saddam Iraq," in *Iraq, its Neighbors and the United States*, ed. by P. Marr, et al. (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2011), 67–92.
17. For more on this issue, see Mohsen Milani, "Iran and Saudi Arabia Square off," *Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136409/mohsen-milani/iran-and-saudi-arabia-square-off>.
18. See Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry, "How Hezbollah Defeated Israel: Winning the Intelligence War," *Asia Times*, October 12, 2006, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HJ12Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HJ12Ak01.html); Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry, "Winning the Ground War," *Asia Times*, October 13, 2006, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HJ13Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HJ13Ak01.html); Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry, "The Political War," *Asia Times*, October 14, 2006, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HJ14Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HJ14Ak01.html); For a more balanced analysis, see Anthony Cordesman, "Preliminary "Lessons" of the Israeli–Hezbollah War," (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 7, 2006), [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060817\\_isr\\_hez\\_lessons.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060817_isr_hez_lessons.pdf). For an Israeli perspective, see Maj. Gen. Yaakov Amidror and Dan Diker, "A Strategic Assessment of the Hizbollah War," *Jerusalem Issue Brief* 6, no. 2, July 19, 2006.
19. Max Fisher, "The four reasons Russia won't give up Syria, no matter what Obama does," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/09/05/the-four-reasons-russia-wont-give-up-syria-no-matter-what-obama-does/>.
20. For a favorable analysis of the role of "resistance" in Iranian policy and narrative, see Alastair Crooke, *The Essence of Islamist Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).
21. See, for example, Mohammad Shariati Dahaghan, "Iran Should Not Stand Against the Syrian People," [in Persian], *Iran Diplomacy*, <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/page/12075/ایران+مقابل+مردم+سوریه+قرار+نگیرد>.
22. As quoted in Jubin Goodarzi, "Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?" *Wilson Center, Middle East Program, Viewpoints series*, no. 35, August 2013, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iran\\_syria\\_crossroads\\_fall\\_tehran\\_damascus\\_axis.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iran_syria_crossroads_fall_tehran_damascus_axis.pdf).
23. "Syria is the 35th State," *Asr Iran*, [in Persian], <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/257730/سوریه+می+خواهد+ستان+را+بگیرد+اولویت+حفظ+سوریه+است+تخریب+هـم+مثل+قبل+نیست+رئیس+قرار+گاه+عمار/257730>  
سوریه+استان+سی+و+پنجم+است+اگر+دشمن+بخواهد

24. "Wonders of Lebanese Hezbollah in a Nassarollh's Unannounced Meeting," [in Persian]. *Op. cit.*
25. "S. Nasralla: Resistance Awake Day and Night, Time to Reveal Facts of July War," *Al Manar*, August 13, 2013, <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=106204&cid=23&fromval=1&frid=23&seccatid=14&s1=1>
26. For a very different perspective on Iranian objectives, see Shimon Shapira, "Iran's Plan to Take Over Syria," *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, 13, no. 10, May 5, 2013.
27. Sinem Cengiz, "Iran's Plan B in post-Assad Syria to create Alawite state," *Today's Zaman*, April 1, 2013, <http://www.todayzaman.com/news-311373-irsns-plan-b-i-post-assad-syria-to-create-alawite-state.html>.
28. "Iraq Says It Can't Halt Arms to Syria," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/world/middleeast/iraq-says-it-cant-halt-arms-to-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/world/middleeast/iraq-says-it-cant-halt-arms-to-syria.html?_r=0)
29. "UPDATE 3-Syrian rebels free 48 Iranians in prisoner swap -Turkish NGO," *Chicago Tribune*, January 9, 2013, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-01-09/news/sns-rt-syria-crisisprisoners-update-315e9c964r-20130109\\_1\\_syrian-insurgents-al-baraa-brigade-syrian-government](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-01-09/news/sns-rt-syria-crisisprisoners-update-315e9c964r-20130109_1_syrian-insurgents-al-baraa-brigade-syrian-government).
30. As quoted in Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa\\_fact\\_filkins](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins).
31. "Syria would be a quagmire for NATO, Iran says," *Tehran Times*, August 29, 2011, <http://www.tehrantimes.com/politics/2061-syria-would-be-a-quagmire-for-nato-iran-says->
32. "Roee Nahmias, "Ahmadinejad to Syria: Killings 'serve Zionist interests'," *Ynet News*, August 25, 2011, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4113760,00.html>.
33. "Iran, Russia sign strategic cooperation agreement," *Payvand Iran News*, November 11, 2011, <http://www.payvand.com/news/11/nov/1113.html>.
34. All Data for this section from, "The Observatory of Economic Complexity," <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/>.
35. "6.3 million dollar credit line," [in Persian], *Deutsche Welle Persian*, <http://www.dw.de/۳میلیارد-دولاری-ایران-جسوسوریا-عطای-خط-اعتباری-۶-۱۶۹۸۸۸۶۱>.
36. Dimitry Minin, "The Geopolitics of Gas and the Syrian Crisis: Syrian "Opposition" Armed to Thwart Construction of Iran-Iraq-Syria Gas Pipeline," *Global Research*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-geopolitics-of-gas-and-the-syrian-crisis-syrian-opposition-armed-to-thwart-construction-of-iran-iraq-syria-gas-pipeline/5337452>.
37. "Strengthening Lebanese army, strategic policy for Iran," *Press TV. Op. cit.*
38. Neil MacFarquhar, "Iran is Seeking Lebanon Stake as Syria Totters," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/25/world/middleeast/with-syria-in-turmoil-iran-seeks-deeper-partner-in-lebanon.html>.
39. "Nasrallah blames Takfiri groups for deadly Beirut car bomb attack," *Press TV*, August 16, 2013, <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/08/16/319076/takfiris-behind-beirut-attack-nasrallah/>.
40. Karen DeYoung and Joby Warrick, "Iran and Hezbollah Build Militia Networks in Syria in Even that Assad Falls, officials say," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2013, [Terrorism Monitor 11, no. 9, May 2, 2013, The Jamestown Foundation, \[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\\_cache=1&tx\\\_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\\_ttnews%5Ball\\\_the\\\_words%5D=nabucco%20austria&tx\\\_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=6&tx\\\_ttnews%5Btt\\\_news%5D=40819&tx\\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381&cHash=8d0d4f2348db5bad046a92778c2e8c6a#.UhlO3Xy9KSM\]\(http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\_cache=1&tx\_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\_ttnews%5Ball\_the\_words%5D=nabucco%20austria&tx\_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=6&tx\_ttnews%5Btt\_news%5D=40819&tx\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381&cHash=8d0d4f2348db5bad046a92778c2e8c6a#.UhlO3Xy9KSM\).](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-10/world/37026054_1_syrian-government-forces-iran-and-hezbollah-president-bashar; and Nicholas Heras, )
41. Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt, "As Fighters Flood Syria, Fears of a New Extremist Haven," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/09/world/middleeast/as-foreign-fighters-flood-syria-fears-of-a-new-extremist-haven.html?smid=tw-share&\\_r=0&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/09/world/middleeast/as-foreign-fighters-flood-syria-fears-of-a-new-extremist-haven.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0&pagewanted=print).

42. For an excellent analysis of the costs and benefits of U.S. military intervention in Syria, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "Breaking the Stalemate: The Military Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War and Options for Limited US. Intervention," Brookings, Saban Center, Middle East Memo series, no. 30, August 12, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/08/09-military-syria-civil-war-us-intervention-pollack>. For a persuasive argument against U.S. intervention in Syria, see David Bromwich, "Stay Out of Syria!" *The New York Review of Books*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/jun/20/stay-out-syria/>.
43. Efraim Halevy, "Iran's Achilles' Heel," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/opinion/to-weaken-iran-start-with-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/opinion/to-weaken-iran-start-with-syria.html?_r=0).
44. For more on this issue, see Mohsen Milani, "Rouhani's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, June 25, 2013. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139531/mohsen-milani/rouhanis-foreign-policy>.
45. Bernard Gwertzman, "Finding a Way Forward With Iran," Council on Foreign Relations, interview with Mohsen Milani, September 26, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/finding-way-forward-iran/p31497>.