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The Syrian-Iranian Alliance: Whither the Damascus-Tehran Axis?

by Jubin M. Goodarzi

“The Islamic Republic of Iran aims to strengthen its 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.”

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, 4 August 2013

“In a world where global politics is no longer a zero sum game, it is–or should be–counterintuitive to pursue one’s interest without considering the interest of others...we must join hands to constructively work toward national dialogue, whether in Syria or Bahrain.”

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, 19 September 2013

Undoubtedly, one of the most fascinating and intriguing developments in modern Middle East politics has been the emergence and continuity of the Syrian-Iranian alliance since its formation in 1979. For more than three decades now, the Tehran-Damascus axis has continued to baffle many observers. Pointing to differences in their respective ideologies, as well as their political foundations and structures, many analysts have been perplexed as to how a revolutionary, pan-Islamic theocracy
such as Iran could ally itself with a secular, pan-Arab, socialist republic like Syria.\textsuperscript{1} Moreover, while Ba’thist Syria claims to be an ardent supporter and the rightful leader of the pan-Arab cause, Iran champions Islamic universalism and rejects secularism.\textsuperscript{2}

The Syrian-Iranian axis has endured for thirty-five years, in spite of the many challenges that it has faced and periodic strains in the relationship. Overall, the longstanding ties between these two states continue to be of great interest at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly in view of major developments in the Middle East in recent years such as the US-led 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, the 2006 Lebanon war, and the outbreak of the Syrian revolt in 2011.

The purpose of this article is to provide an analytical framework to understand the forces, which have shaped and influenced the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Furthermore, it will highlight the importance of the axis and the reasons for its longevity. The article will also present a detailed account and analysis of the evolution of Iranian perceptions and involvement in the three-year-old Syrian crisis.

**The Importance of the Syrian-Iranian Nexus**

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-and-a-half decades, as we have seen again in recent years during the 2006 Lebanon war which pitted Israel against the Syrian and Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement, and Iran’s support for the Assad regime since the eruption of the Syrian crisis in March 2011. Secondly, it has proven to be an enduring relationship that has lasted thirty-five 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.”\textsuperscript{3} As far as Iran is concerned, many view it as the strategic prize in Southwest Asia and the Persian Gulf, as documented in Graham Fuller’s work on the geopolitics of Iran, entitled *The Center of the Universe*.\textsuperscript{4}

Over the past three-and-a-half 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 ensured that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq would not become the predominant power in the Middle East. They were also able to thwart Tel Aviv’s strategy to bring Lebanon into its own orbit, following the June 1982 Israeli invasion of that country and occupation of almost half its territory. Through the use of Lebanese proxies—most notably Hezbollah—Syria and Iran were able to expose the limits of Israeli military power and forced Tel Aviv to withdraw from the territory it occupied between 1984 and 2000. Concurrently, in this same arena, they were able to inflict one of the very few foreign policy setbacks that Ronald Reagan suffered during his two terms in office as US president in the 1980s. This was exemplified by the bombings of the US embassy and the US
Marine barracks in Beirut, and the eventual withdrawal of American forces from Lebanon during 1983 and 1984. Even in the post-Cold War era, with American predominance on the regional and global stage, the imposition of economic sanctions on both countries, and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Syria and Iran have been able to wield considerable power and influence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Lebanon and—directly and indirectly—on world oil markets, as events in recent years have demonstrated.

A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Syrian-Iranian Alliance

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

In general, defensive alliances, which have set and limited objectives are more stable and durable. This, in part, explains the longevity of the 35-year-long partnership. Defensive alliances are less fragile than offensive ones. Offensive alliances quite often fall apart once the opponent has been attacked and vanquished. The rationale for maintaining the alliance consequently ceases to exist for the members, and they frequently fall out and squabble over the fruits of their victory.

Furthermore, it should be underscored that another reason that has contributed to the stability and longevity of the alliance is that the two partners’ priorities differ in the two arenas in which they cooperate. For Iran, the Persian Gulf region is the main area of concern, while for Syria, it is the Levant. Over time, by continually consulting one another and modifying their aims, the two allies came to recognize this reality. Consequently, they tried to coordinate their policies and accommodate one another, while at the same time, protecting and furthering their own interests. More specifically, after a number of crises in the relationship which erupted between 1985 and 1988, when Iran in particular was pursuing certain policies in Lebanon against the wishes of Syria (by propping up Hezbollah at the expense of Amal and attempting to Islamicize the country), an understanding was eventually reached on key issues through continuous consultations. Syrian interests would take precedence in the Arab-Israeli arena, while in the Gulf region, Damascus would defer to Tehran. Therefore, the more complementary the interests of alliance members, the more easily intra-alliance compromises and agreements can be reached. Although their interests and policies did not always converge, through regular consultations, the two allies gradually tried to
resolve their differences, harmonize their positions and coordinate their actions.

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

In the Middle East, the record clearly shows that states sharing a common ideology compete for the mantle of leadership rather than form durable alliances. Each state may claim to be the legitimate leader, and may even demand others to relinquish their rights and sovereignty to form a single political entity. This was quite evident in the rivalries between the pan-Arab regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq between the 1950s and 1990s, including the competition between the rival wings of the Ba'th Party in Syria and Iraq. Another poignant example of rivalries between states with similar ideologies was the animosity between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan until 2001. It should not be forgotten that Tehran almost went to war with the Taliban in August 1998 after the massacre of thousands of Afghan civilians and a dozen Iranian consular officials in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, when more people were killed than in the September 11 attacks. Iran deployed over 100 thousand troops on the Afghan-Iranian border and held ground and air maneuvers. Overall, the historical record in the post-1945 era demonstrates that alliances among Arab states and communist countries that sought to form a single, centralized movement have been unstable and short-lived. In the final analysis, common ideologies have often served as obstacles to unity, prompting states to compete with one another rather than form durable alliances.  

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

At the same time, it should be noted that both Ba'hist 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, demonstrate its solidarity by actively participating in the Arab-Israeli struggle, and create Muslim unity in the region by surmounting Arab-Iranian political divisions and Shia-Sunni religious differences, 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 maneuver by diminishing foreign—particularly American—influence in the region. As a result, to
advance their common agenda over the years and decades, both regimes have put longer-term interests before short-term gains. This was clearly manifested in the period between 1985 and 1988 when the temptation to terminate the alliance may have been great, particularly for Syria (at a time when both had conflicting agendas in Lebanon, Iran was not forthcoming with oil deliveries to Syria, and Tehran was enraged by Damascus’ attempts to thaw relations with Amman and Baghdad), but instead the alliance was consolidated due to overarching strategic concerns and long-term interests.

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

### The Syrian-Iranian Axis and the Impact of the Arab Uprisings

When the Arab Uprisings first began in the winter of 2010-2011, with the initial wave of popular protests in Tunisia, which subsequently 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 Uprisings 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.10

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, 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 Uprisings in the context of the US-Iranian rivalry in the region commented: “Bahrain tripped up the Americans, while Syria tripped us up.”11 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 Shias 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 Shia Iran and Hezbollah—to which he referred as the “Party of Satan.” Others depicted Shias as a greater threat to the Arab world than Israel. 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, Khalid Mashal, left Damascus and declared his support for the Syrian opposition.

Tehran initially hoped that by assisting the Ba’thist regime, Damascus would be able to ride out the crisis within a short time. As a result, Iran staunchly supported Assad’s efforts to crush the 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 Qods 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. However, their numbers were limited, at most in the hundreds (in the two years that followed), and not as opposition sources claimed in the thousands.

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

As the Syrian crisis continued into the autumn and winter of 2011, it increasingly assumed both a regional and international dimension. A proxy war began to emerge involving both regional and international actors. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf 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 perceived its regional rivals—particularly Riyadh—as using the Syrian crisis as 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 US 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 did not block the passage of UNSC Resolution 1973 which provided NATO with the legal justification to intervene militarily to topple Muammar Qaddafi under the pretext of R2P—responsibility to protect civilians.) Iran and its allies increasingly came to view the situation in Syria as a zero-sum game, fearing that the ouster of the Syrian Ba’th could pave the way for the emergence of a new regime in Damascus that would be hostile towards Tehran. Consequently, the Iranian leadership made a strategic decision to fully support Assad by providing arms, oil and financial aid.\[18]

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. Iran’s interest in a political dialogue and possible diplomatic solution increased as the conflict in Syria dragged on into 2013, and it came to the bitter realization that the armed opposition could not be routed. Tehran looked for options to cut its losses and ensure that irrespective of the outcome of events in Syria, an anti-Iranian government would not come to power in Damascus. Concomitantly, Iran 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 calculated that if the opposition failed to topple the Syrian Ba’th, it may eventually be amenable at the very least to some form of transitional government that contains some elements from the ancien regime. In essence, over the past two years, Iran has pursued a two-track policy by trying to engage in diplomacy to resolve the Syrian debacle politically, and in parallel, continuing to provide military support to the Assad regime.

It should be emphasized that with the passage of time, Tehran sees a number of advantages to a negotiated settlement to 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 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 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 Shias. 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 started over the past year to build up a militia force in Syria known as the People’s Army (Jaysh al-Sha’bi)
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 100-thousand strong.\textsuperscript{20} 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.

If the Assad government is toppled, this would represent a major setback for Iran. 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 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.\textsuperscript{21} 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 also 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 US and Israeli military action against Iran.\textsuperscript{22}

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 Shia-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 in 2013 was the announcement of the alliance between Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Nusra Front (Jabha al-Nusra) in Syria. Consequently, there is now a genuine fear in Tehran that if the Assad regime is toppled, it may have a knock-on 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. In fact, the security situation in Iraq figured prominently in the discussions Nouri al-Maliki had with the Iranian leadership during his first state visit to Tehran after Hassan Rouhani’s election.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, 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 its alliance with Tehran, but as part of a longer term strategy to isolate and overthrow the Islamic Republic. According to Hojatolislam Mehdi Taeb, a close ally of Iran’s Supreme Leader, “if we lose Syria, we won’t be able to hold Tehran.”\textsuperscript{24}

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’th 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 which are implacably hostile towards Tehran. To date, Iran has done all it can to ensure that Bashar Assad will not be toppled by pouring in men, materiel 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 (majles) have expressed disappointment about the results in the past. According to one estimate, by late 2012, Tehran had spent over US $10 billion to support the Assad regime. More recently, in July 2013, Tehran extended a US $3.6 billion line-of-credit to Damascus for the purchase of oil.

The Rise of Rouhani and Its Ramifications

Since the ascendance of Hassan Rouhani to the office of president in August 2013, it is evident that Syria has remained the main foreign policy challenge in the Middle East for the new Iranian leader. Hassan Rouhani is fully aware of Syria’s importance since he has been a key figure in the Islamic Republic’s political-security establishment, holding important government posts, including serving as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) between 1989 and 2005. The situation in Syria has been a major concern and preoccupation for President Rouhani and his team. Rouhani cannot be described as a hardliner, moderate nor reformist, but as a pragmatist. It is noteworthy that the political rhetoric emanating from Tehran has softened, and there have been shifts in the posture of the new administration. Iran has continued its two-pronged strategy of continuing to prop up the Assad regime, and concomitantly, seeking a political solution to the Syrian crisis. However, Rouhani has been placing greater emphasis on pursuing a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria. Over the past several months, he has repeatedly underscored that the crisis must be resolved by the Syrians themselves and signalled Iran’s readiness to mediate between the Assad regime and the opposition. For instance, Rouhani declared that “the ground should be prepared for holding an absolutely free election with no preconditions.” The Iranian president realizes that there is no military solution, and the political track needs to be pursued more vigorously. Foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has also voiced concern and warned the West by stating, “if the flames of sectarianism rage in the Middle East, you will see the results in the streets of London, New York, Rome and Madrid…we think people [in Syria] should be making their decisions at the ballot box and the tragedy there should come to an end with the help of neighboring countries.”

In order to set the stage for finding common ground on Syria with Iran’s neighbors and also mending fences with its regional rivals, the Rouhani administration has embarked on a diplomatic offensive in recent months to improve relations and diminish its isolation in the Middle East. Furthermore, its success in reaching an interim agreement with the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) on the nuclear issue has contributed to defusing tensions and building some degree of trust. Iran’s diplomatic efforts have been led by foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif who has visited Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and a number of Gulf Arab states. These efforts seem to have yielded fruit as Ankara and Tehran have jointly...
declared the need for a negotiated settlement to the Syrian conflict, and the GCC has praised Iran’s new overtures and agreement to limit its nuclear activities. Iran has engaged in intensive efforts to mend fences with Turkey. As bilateral relations have thawed, Ankara has signalled its support for Iranian participation in peace talks on Syria. The rapprochement can be also partially attributed to the deterioration of Saudi-Turkish relations due to differences over Egypt and Syria. Last July, Riyadh backed the military coup in Cairo which ousted the Muslim Brethren from power, while Ankara vehemently denounced it. Furthermore, Turkey has been alarmed by Saudi attempts to limit its influence over the Syrian opposition, and it does not want to become a hotbed for Sunni Islamic extremists.

It remains to be seen whether Rouhani will have a free hand to pursue a new foreign policy, especially if it entails making some hard choices in order to reach an agreement on Syria. It is evident that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the hardliners have empowered Rouhani and Zarif to negotiate on the nuclear issue in order to diminish Iran’s isolation and improve the domestic economy. However, on key security issues, particularly regarding Syria and Lebanon, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its elite Qods Force have been the main drivers of Iranian policy. It is noteworthy that shortly after his inauguration, Rouhani served notice to the IRGC that they must stay out of politics and refrain from interfering in political decision-making. Rouhani asserted that “the IRGC is above and beyond political currents, not beside or within them…the IRGC has a higher status, which is that of the whole nation.” The IRGC in turn, to date has given qualified support to the Rouhani administration’s moves by stating that it supported any steps so long as they were in line with the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s strategies and Iranian national interests “based on dignity, expediency and logic.” Hardliners in Tehran may impede and thwart Rouhani’s moves in view of their hostility toward the US and its allies in the Middle East.

In recent months, since the beginning of 2014, a number of developments have undermined the position of the Rouhani administration and strengthened the hand of the more hardline elements led by IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari and Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani who advocated unconditional support for the Syrian regime. First, from the Iranian perspective, if Tehran had not been invited to the Geneva II talks in January, it would have been highly disconcerting. However, the fact that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon initially extended an invitation to the Islamic Republic and then withdrew it after coming under immense pressure from the US and the Syrian opposition was considered deeply offensive and humiliating. This weakened the position of the pragmatists who believed that after concluding the interim agreement with the P5+1 on the Iranian nuclear program in November 2013, this landmark accord could build mutual trust and confidence, with cooperation then spilling over into the Syrian peace negotiations. Barring Iranian participation in Geneva II dashed such hopes. Furthermore, US Secretary of State John Kerry’s statement that Iran could be allowed to contribute informally to the negotiations from the sidelines was interpreted as adding insult to injury. In view of Iran’s status as a regional power and a key player in the Syrian conflict, the Iranian foreign ministry’s spokesperson rejected Tehran playing only an informal role, declaring, “the Islamic Republic of Iran will not accept any proposal which does not respect its dignity.” Second, the failure of the Geneva II talks to yield any positive results in finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict reinforced the position of the hawks in Tehran would favored providing greater military support to the Assad regime in order to build on the momentum and successes which had been achieved on the ground against the rebels since 2013. Third, the
outbreak of fighting in recent months among the Syrian opposition forces, most notably between the Free Syrian Army and the al-Qaeda inspired Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Nusra Front was seen by Soleimani as propitious opportunity to exploit divisions among the ranks of the rebels and seize the initiative in order to defeat them.\textsuperscript{36}

In recent weeks, Tehran has dispatched more military advisors, specialists and elite units (primarily from the IRGC but also other branches) to train Syrian government forces and pro-regime militias. There have been reports that they have established a presence in the vital government-controlled seaports of Tartus and Latakia, and Iranian transport aircraft have been ferrying weapons directly to the airport in Hama.\textsuperscript{37} In order to bolster the ranks of pro-government forces on the ground, with Iranian guidance and support, greater numbers of Iraqi militiamen from the Shia Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata’ib Hezbollah are being sent to take part in the fighting in Syria. It is estimated that between 8,000 to 15,000 Shia militiamen, primarily from Iraq and Lebanon, are currently in Syria.\textsuperscript{38} More recently, there have been reports that Iran is also recruiting Afghans to fight for the Syrian regime.\textsuperscript{39} In addition, due to the easing of international sanctions following the nuclear agreement last November, Iran has begun to ship larger amounts of oil to Syria.\textsuperscript{40}

Conclusion

Overall, the events of the past few months bode ill for resolving the Syrian conflict through peaceful means. On the international level, the rift between Washington and Moscow since the eruption of the crisis in the Ukraine may diminish the prospects of future joint US-Russian diplomatic initiatives to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian imbroglio. On the regional level, in spite of Iran’s rapprochement with a number of key neighbors, most notably Turkey, and recent positive signals emanating from Saudi Arabia, differences still remain.\textsuperscript{41} On the domestic level, in Syria, the failure of the Geneva II talks clearly demonstrated the huge political divide that continues to exist between the Assad regime and its opponents. The recent resignation of Lakhdar Brahimi has been another ominous sign of the dismal state of affairs. With regard to Iran, although senior Iranian officials such as Rouhani and Zarif have continued to reiterate the need to find a political solution and called for elections in Syria, their position has been undermined by recent events. Iranian hardliners who urge support for the Syrian regime at any cost seem to be on the ascendancy for the moment. From the perspective of policy makers in Tehran, even if Assad can never reassert control over all of Syria, his ability to hold onto Damascus and the southern and western regions of the country could be considered a limited victory depending on how events unfold on the ground in the future.

In conclusion, at present, Iran will do all it can to ensure that Bashar Assad will not be toppled. There is no doubt that the Syrian-Iranian alliance is at a critical crossroads and its days may be numbered. That being said, its resilience and ability to survive major crises should not be underestimated. Those who dismiss its strength and capabilities, do so at their own peril. The alliance has always been able to thrive and surprise its opponents when it has been on the defensive. This has consistently been the case over the past three-and-a-half decades. In 1980, Saddam Hussein did not think that his invasion of Iran would lead to the formalization of the Tehran-Damascus nexus, thereby enabling it to thwart his efforts to deal a death blow against revolutionary Iran. Two years later, in 1982, Menachem Begin and Ronald Reagan could not
foresee that the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the deployment of the Multinational Force would fail to bring the country into the US-Israeli orb due to the decisive response and countermeasures taken by Syria, Iran and their Lebanese allies. In 2006, once again, Ehud Olmert and George W. Bush initially envisaged that a month-long, intensive aerial, naval and ground campaign waged by the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) would result in the destruction of Hezbollah and weaken the regional power and stature of Syria and Iran. In fact, the exact opposite happened as Hezbollah was able to weather the storm, and in aftermath of the conflict, the popularity of Bashar Assad and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad soared to unprecedented heights in the Arab-Islamic world. Finally, in early 2011, when the unrest in Syria erupted, no one predicted that the Assad regime would still be in power three years later as a direct consequence of stalwart Iranian support. Many believed that it would quickly meet with the same fate as the Ben Ali, Mubarak and Qaddafi regimes. Hence, it should be underscored that irrespective of how much longer the Damascus-Tehran nexus endures, its impact on Middle East politics over the past 35 years has been undeniable and significant. It has left its mark on the political landscape of the modern Middle East.

Jubin M. Goodarzi is Deputy Head of the International Relations Department at Webster University Geneva in Switzerland. He was previously a consultant on Middle Eastern affairs for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva. He has also worked with a number of US and UK research institutes and foundations, including the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London, and the Ford Foundation in New York. Dr. Goodarzi is author of Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), and numerous articles and book reviews on the international relations of the Middle East. He holds a B.A. in International Studies from the American University, a M.A. in Arab Studies from Georgetown University, and a doctorate in International Relations from the London School of Economics (LSE).

2 Hirschfeld, p. 105.
7 Liska, p. 62. Liska argues that consultations strengthen alliance cohesion since they reinforce solidarity and equality among the members. Liska, p. 69.
8 Liska, p. 82.
10 See Meris Lutz, “Iran’s Supreme Leader Calls Uprising an ‘Islamic Awakening’,” The Los Angeles Times, 4 February 2011.
11 Confidential conversation with a senior Iranian official, Geneva, Switzerland, March 2012.


For example, the recent spate of bombings targeting Hezbollah strongholds and the Iranian embassy in Beirut orchestrated by Sunni extremists underscore the growing tensions and displeasure with Hezbollah’s and Iran’s actions in the Syrian theater.


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


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For example, see Hugh Tomlinson, “Tehran Split Over Billions Spent by Spy Chief to Prop Up Assad Regime,” The Times of London, 1 October 2012.


“Turkey Expels Saudi Intelligence Over Diplomatic Rift: Source,” Al-Akhbar, 1 November 2013.


For more details and analysis on the perspectives of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states on Iran see Ian Black, “Gulf Widens as Iran Returns from the Cold,” The Guardian, 12 December 2013, and Bernard Haykel and Daniel Kurtzer, “Saudi Arabia and Israel Have Very Different Concerns about Iran,” The Daily Star, 17 December 2013.

Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Says Iran Won’t Attend Peace Talks on Syria,” The International New York Times, 10
January 2014.
38 Martin Chulov, “Controlled by Iran, the Deadly Militia Recruiting Iraq’s Men to Die in Syria,” The Guardian, 12 March 2014.
39 For details, see Farnaz Fassihi, “Iran Pays Afghans to Fight for Assad,” The Wall Street Journal, 16 May 2014.