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Iran-Syria Relations During the Syrian Civil War (2010-2024)

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the complex interactions between Iran and Syria from 2010 to 2024. The research aims to examine how these relationships have evolved and been influenced by the Syrian civil war. It is crucial to assess the potential outcomes of a scenario where the current authority in Syria changes, particularly with the possible end of the Assad regime. This assessment will help identify both the beneficial and adverse effects that this new situation, along with the potential loss of influence, may have on Iran's future. By studying the historical, current, and possible future interactions between Iran and Syria, this work seeks to enhance understanding of the main features of the Middle Eastern regional system and Iran's role within it.

Key Words: Axis of resistance, Middle East, Islamic revolution, Assad regime, demographic change, military cooperation

Introduction

Due to the common threats posed by Israel and the United States to Iran and Syria, the media refer to them as the "axis of resistance". Iran has been recognized by many countries; however, Syria was the first Arab country to do so (Soage, 2020). They have foreign relations and their friendship has evolved after the incident of Islamic Revolution in the year 1979. Being a Shiite nation in the mainly Sunni Middle East, Iran has a lot in common with Syria, which is ruled by Alawites – a Shiite branch (Blanga, 2022). Both nations do not recognize Israel and do not accept western influence in the Middle East. They have formed an alliance; supply each other with assistance in any conflict within the region like during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) where Syria gave diplomatic and supply support to Iran (Phillips, 2011). Besides, they have regional defense pacts like the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah alliance for combating Israel and the West in the Middle East. Tehran has been supplying most of the equipment's and



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training as well as advisory support in military to the Damascus (Terrill, 2015). This relationship was particularly pronounced during the Syrian Civil War, where Iranian arms supplies and the deployment of Revolutionary Guard units, along with Hezbollah fighters, played an important role in supporting the administration of Bashar al-Assad. Supreme leader Khamenei indicated that “Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel that must be protected” (Sadjadpour, 2018). Ammar Headquarters, a former official of the IRGC, expressed his views on the significance of Syria for Iran. He stated that Iran considers Syria to be the 35th province of the country. Iran aims to protect Syria because the safety of Syria is crucial for the security of Khuzestan province in Iran. If Iran fails to safeguard Syria, it may struggle to protect Tehran as well (Arnold, 2024).

Iran-Syria Relations from 2010 to 2024:

Iran Advisory Support in Syrian civil War (2011-2012): In response to the Syrian crisis, Iran initially adopted an approach centered on advisory support for the Syrian government. This involved dispatching military advisers and trainers to assist the Syrian army in managing the uprising. Totten discussed the importance of the Assad government for both Iran and Hezbollah. The fall of the Assad government would negatively impact Iran and Hezbollah, as they would lose a crucial ally in the region (Yolcu, 2016). Iran’s primary intention during this phase was to help the Assad regime stabilize the country. Furthermore, Tehran specialized in constructing local militias, including the Shabia, to assist Syria’s national military efforts (Divsallar & Azizi, 2024). This strategy helped Iran to support the groups but ensure they did not dominate the process and overwhelm it. Thus, by limiting its role to the advisory one, Iran showed a cautious approach which was wed to both support for the Assad regime and to the endeavors not to provoke other regional and international players. Nevertheless, because of the unceasing threats of the uprising, Iran’s participation allowed the Syrian government to regain some territories but the challenges experienced called for a review of the tactics.

Regionalization (2012-2015): Therefore, Iran increased its support in the Syrian war in 2012 and started cooperating with allies such as Hezbollah (Al-Araji, 2023). This was a significant upturn in Iran’s indirect participation in the Syrian conflict as it began to send transnational militias to directly support the Syrian army. The regionalization strategy was expounded on the belief that it would strengthen Assad’s forces and slow down the progress of the opposition on the ground. Support of Hezbollah contributed to the stabilization of the situation and strengthening of the side of Assad. Additionally, Iran formed other international groups, such as the Fatemi Youn Brigade which composed of Afghans and Pakistanis enabling the Iranians to not only consolidate its forces in Syria but also ensure it received the requisite territorial incentives (Akhmedov, 2024a).

Internationalization (2015-2017): In 2015 Iran joined the coalition of Russia as an allied force to oppose the increasing influence of US and Turkey in the Syrian conflict. This new turn could be attributed to the fact that Russia was providing military support thus giving Iran a power actor on its side in the ongoing conflict. In this internationalization phase, Iran and Russia were engaged in complex military planning and cooperation and, therefore, achieved important victories that began changing the balance of the conflict in favor of the regime (Therme,



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2021). This partnership also helped Iran strengthen its position in Syria and guarantee that it would continue to act as a key mediator between the US and Turkey to exercise a comprehensive control as to who will be accepted or rejected out from the conflict. This phase depicted Iran as a strong country that is willing to align itself to the circumstances that surround it in order to get what it wants or whatever it had planned.

Post-ISIS Balancing: After the fall of ISIS, Iran became more concerned with maintaining Syria's territorial integrity and maintaining an equal or less favorable relationship with different stakeholders in the region. The aim is to gain a forward deterrence capability against Israel besides maintaining regional hegemony and preventing the aggression by this power. Iran to this day remains involved in the process of Syria's post-war reconstruction and as evidenced, has had a considerable military presence in the country. Yet, the multi-layer interacting with other powerful players, such as Russia, Turkey, and the U.S., requires a delicate balancing strategy. This entails balancing competing claims, managing crises and protecting its niche gains within the region. This phase refocused on Iran strong presence in Syria to show that it is ready to lay its ground and protect its strategic assets along with ensuring stability in the region. Islamic Azad University of Iran offered to establish branches in Syria to help in reconstruction especially in electric power field, Contracts worth more than \$188.75 million were signed for establishing power facilities and to enhance water and sewage services (Ebrahimi, 2017). The civil unrest has led to displacement and the general plan is to change demographics in its favor by relocating people around Damascus to enhance Shia loyalty. Iran seeks to develop a "Shiite" township to accommodate militia families where the Iranian regime has been grabbing lands under the pretext of the laws that enable it to buy properties below market price for its sectarian demography (Reiff, 2020).

The purpose of the present research paper is to critically investigate the profound changes in the relations between Iran and Syria during the period 2010-2024. The research will also seek to analyse the effect of the Syrian civil war on the military and economic cooperation between Russia and Syria. It will offer a broad perspective of political, economic and military factors at this time.

Upon engaging with this article, readers will gain insights into several key questions:

1. How has Iran supported the Assad government during the Syrian civil war through financial and military assistance?
2. In what areas are Iran and Syria collaborating, and what does the future hold for their relations in the incident of a potential change in the Assad regime?

Literature Review

"Iran and the Syrian crises," Abdul Hamid Al Eed Al-Moussawi states that Iran helped the Assad government militarily, politically, and economically because it regarded the overthrow of Assad as a danger to itself. This support comes from relations that were built after the Islamic revolution in 1979 and is intended to maintain favorable effect in the area especially in Lebanon. Iran has accused the U.S. and other Western countries of fueling unrest in Syria while at the same time calling for change in line with the Syrian's people's wishes some of whom are reformist Iranians. This war and the Lebanon War made Iran and Syria to



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enhance their cooperation since they both strong influence from the US. Iran's assistance included military assistance where the Iranian Revolutionary Guard was reported to be actively participating alongside the Syrian forces, and economic relations estimated at between \$600 million and \$800 million. President Hassan Rouhani has shown concern in new directions of the Iranian foreign policy such as enhancing relations with Saudi Arabia and supporting Syrian's right to self-determination. It is unclear how much he influenced Iran's Syria policy, since other factions, particularly the Revolutionary Guard, played a large role (Al- Moussawi, 2017).

The article states that Iran provides substantial financial support to the Syrian regime but fails to thoroughly analyze how this impacts Iran's economy. While some of the issues raised pertain to Iran's relationships with other countries in the region, the overall analysis of the regional situation lacks comprehensiveness. "*Iran and Syria: an enduring axis*," the author Edward Wastnidge discusses a strategic alliance between Iran and Syria which has been operating since the Iranian revolution in 1979. This coalition mainly consists of countries that are anti-American and anti-Israel in their political stance. In this case, the foundation of this relationship can be dated back to the 1970 period when Lebanon started to play the middleman for Syria and Iran. President Assad also realized the importance of the Shia population of Lebanon as a factor in keeping him relevant in the Middle East. Syrian Relations began when Khamenei was exiled from Iraq in 1978, he was given asylum in Syria hence the strong bond between the two countries. Their relations are based on the main concerns that unite them, such as in Iraq and Lebanon, and an outlook on Russia and the United States and the disapproval of Israel. Many people have accused Assad of supporting Iran as if he follows the actions Israel has taken and supports the Palestinian issue. It shows why Lebanon is important to both Iran and Syria which utilizes Hezbollah as its tool in their continuous warfare against Israel. This is because through Hezbollah, Iran and Syria can easily coordinate and thus improving on their operations. Furthermore, both countries have stakes in Iraq, as the United States was interested in the country not to install a pro-American regime after Hussein's rule. Russia and Syria have historical ties predating the Syrian conflict to the Soviet Union while Russia acts as a major arms supplier and has a naval base in the Mediterranean at Tartus. Despite the situation, cooperation between Russia and both Iran and Syria is still developing as Russia follows its own goals in the Middle East. The growing military confrontation with Saudi Arabia has shifted the Syrian crisis to a new level of importance for the automotive parties involved and for the regional proxy wars. During the Syrian Civil War, Iran has been giving financial aid to Syria through a number of loans in order to enhance economy. Furthermore, Iran has also been deploying trainers training Shiite volunteer fighters with Hezbollah enhancing this cooperation in the region (Wastnidge, 2017).

The article mainly explores the strategic and historical aspects of the Iran-Syria alliance; however, it does not examine potential counterarguments or alternative perspectives regarding the nature of this relationship. Some possible research questions that could fill this gap include: How do internal political dynamics and public perceptions in Iran and Syria influence the character and evolution of their bilateral relations?



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"Iran's Syria strategy: The evolution of deterrence," authored by Payam Mohseni and Hassan Ahmadian, efficiently covers all the crucial points that Iran as well as Syria has in common despite the existing ideological differences. They are both militarily aligning themselves to reduce the influence of foreign powers in the Middle East with special emphasis to the Iranian policy towards Syria since 2011. Iran has considerable leverage throughout the Arab world and sees Syria as a vital conduit to the Hezbollah. Syria has supported Iran in the past more specifically in the Iran Iraq war which helped in forging this relationship. The paper claims that Iran uses asymmetric deterrence by sponsoring non-state actors in the region such as Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Quds Force. This diplomatic relationship becomes closer after the Camp David Accords in March 1979 left Syria without an ally in the form of Egypt. At that particular time, Iran had relative cordial relations with the United States and was selling oil to Israel in exchange for military training services. Most important, the SAVAK intelligence service, notorious in Iran for its brutal suppression of dissent, was trained not only by the CIA but also by its counterpart in Israel, Mossad. The U.S led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Syria's following eviction from Lebanon pulled these two nations into closer alliance, with Iran vigorously supporting the Assad administration during the Syrian war. Iran was supporting Syria militarily and economically and they were using good guerrilla warfare strategy. Internally, the people of Iran had been quite engaged in discussion on the Syrian issue. In the past, Iran supported revolutions in the region and described these movements as Islamic revolutions. This is for similar reasons that some voices in Iran were urging the regime to support the demands of the Syrian people during the Arab Spring era. Interestingly, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former Iranian president supported this view, while the more moderate Hashemi Rafsanjani reminded the arcades that Iranians should not abuse Syrians. The most successful Iranian operation was in Syria in 2017; the main focus changed from the expansion to strengthening the control over the territories. The Iran-Syria Axis was an operation that was strategically set by the coalition to focus on military operations on the parts of Syria particularly the Idlib and Deir Ezzor provinces. Thus, Iran is trying to counterbalance the escalation of the hostile actions of the counterparts like the USA, Turkey and Israel in the Syrian conflict. The territorial losses of the Assad regime increased significantly during the middle of the year 2015, including Idlib city. The events in September 2015 involving the Russian military in Syria especially provoked the Iranian leaders to be more worried about the potential action of the U.S because Iran saw it as a direct threat to their authority and security in the region (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019).

The article discusses the debate in Iran regarding the Syrian civil war, but it does not address the role of the Rouhani administration, nor does it mention Iran's recent cooperation and trade with Syria.

"The Syria-Iran Axis: cultural diplomacy and international relations in the Middle East" Nadia von Maltzahn presents interesting examination of the two countries' symbiotic relationship. This alliance based on similar geopolitical agenda points to the possibilities of cooperation interpreted within the context of 'the other side'. Meanwhile, understanding the importance of their bilateral relationship at the state level, the author studies the prevention measures taken



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by the given countries to nurture cultural exchange and positive attitudes in the other country. The Syria-Iran Axis (2008) attempts to shed light on the purpose, subjects, and outcomes of the cultural diplomacy between Iran and Syria to determine what role such ventures have played in eradicating the perceived divide between markedly distinct worldviews and political systems. Through assessing the likelihood of state-directed cultural exchanges in improving two-sided relations in the Middle East, Nadia von Maltzahn provides a positive narrative for the changes and developments in foreign policy and diplomacy in the region's countries (Maltzahn, 2015).

"Iran's soft power presence in Syria after the Syrian Civil War," author Ali Akbar discovers the soft power relations of Iran in the area. During the Syrian war, Iran mobilized Shia Persian militias from Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan to back Assad against anti-government entities. After the war, Iran has been active in cooperation with Syria in different sectors such as culture, religion, and education providing religious and social services for the considerable improvement of society. In the previous years, Iran has focused on employing soft power tactics during the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War and in South Lebanon in order to gain influence over the Shia population after the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in 2006. Furthermore, both Iran and Syria have the same ideology as far as the anti-Israel attitude is concerned, and both have been actively involved in supporting Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance movements since the early 1980s. Again in April 2026 another important decision was made among the Syrian Minister of Higher Education and the Iranian Ambassador to Damascus where Iran had agreed to provide scholarships for the Syrians studying in Iranian universities as well as investing in the educational sector of the Syrian Arab Republic. Iran has also played a major role in supplying Syria's media needs, helping the government in the post-2011 attempts to disseminate information. Such actions were the founding of Pishahangan-e-Imam Mahdi in 2014 and the opening of 40 private Shia schools and universities including Al-Farabi and Al-Mustafa in Damascus that manifested Iran's determination on the spread of Shia doctrine. Also, Iran has been offering social supporting roles to the Syrian government through contributing in constructing schools, health related facilities, and even dwelling units. The Iranian organization Jihad Sazandegi is also active in Syria, where it has implemented various development projects such the construction of a hospital in Deir Ezzor in 2017. Due to the pandemic of Coronavirus, Iran has been involved in the provision of medical supplies and equipment's to Syria with the assistance of various charitable organizations. At the economic level the cooperation has deepened through various accords and the volume of trade that has now stand at over one billion dollars in 2015. Iran has also provided assistance in the power generation segment. In general, Iran's policies concerning Syria focus on infiltration and manipulation from within the Syrian government, and this partnership should only grow in the next few years as it cements Syria a valuable asset in Iran's strategic arsenal (Akbar, 2023).

The article does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Iran's soft power in Syria. It also lacks insights into the perceptions of Syrians regarding Iran's role in the country. Additionally, there is no comparison with the approaches of other countries in Syria. Furthermore, information about Iranian investments in Syria is still lacking.



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Research Methodology

This research utilized secondary and qualitative data. By analyzing reports, interviews, journal articles, and books, the historical relationship between Syria and Iran has been examined. This approach helped identify gaps in the existing literature and develop hypotheses. Data was collected from various websites, journal articles, and books to explain each topic and enhance understanding of Iran-Syria relations post-2010. Additionally, current scenarios and situations were considered to provide a future analysis of Syria and Iran relations, which is discussed at the end of this paper.

Theoretical framework

Realism emphasizes that Iran's support for the Assad government is primarily driven by national interests, particularly in the pursuit of regional security and stability. This strategic partnership underscores Iran's ambition to preserve its influence and navigate a complex geopolitical environment marked by the dynamics of the UN Security Council and U.S. dominance. From a neorealist perspective, the types of regimes and their strategies within the international system significantly influence geopolitical alignments, especially between Iran and Iraq. Iran's participation in the Syrian conflict is largely intended at counterbalancing the growing influence of the Saudi-Turkey coalition in the region. Constructivist theories highlight that Iran's engagement in the Syrian uprising is formed by the geo-strategic importance of Syria. The shared historical experiences of resisting Western imperialism, combined with mutual values, have strengthened the ties of solidarity and cooperation between Iran and Syria. Liberalism points out that economic factors play a crucial role in shaping Iran's policies and cooperation with Syria. Despite the expectations in economic relations with Iran and its sales increasing significantly in the Middle East country, Iran's exports to Syria in 2023 only reached about \$244 million. Some of the emerging issues that have arose with regard to the quality of Iranian products that are in the Syrian market have been able to cause reluctance among the business when they are making deals with their Iranian counterparts. Finally, according to the Marxist approach, it is possible to analyze the processes taking place in the Syrian civil war in connection with the irredentist movement in the southeast European countries, thus exposing numerous hidden aspects of national identity and the territorial claims of the peoples of the region.

Iran Stance on the Syrian protests: A divided perspective

The laws and decisions in relation to the subjects under discussion in Iran are made by the Supreme National Security Council and are formed on the basis of consensus. However, the events occurred concerning the protests in Syria enable Iranian leaders to discuss these issues more freely. As the protest in Syria escalated two main views emerged on how Iran should address this crisis. The first perspective called on Iran to stand with the opposition against despotic rule and join the Syrians in their struggle against oppression, as it did in other Arab Spring rebellions. This strategy was defended by the former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who claimed that Iran should not invest much into the Syrian market as he thought that the leadership of President Assad had become unsustainable, also the moderate leader Hashemi Rafsanjani lamented the



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violence inflicted upon the Syrian people (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019). Alternatively, the second view was significantly connected between the situation in Syria and Iran's Green Revolution in 2009 that occurred due to the claimed fraud vote and became the biggest protest since the Islamic Revolution. Some Iranian leaders recalled the kinship between the Arab protests and the struggle for reform in Iran. The reformist leader Mir Hossein Mousavi pointed out that the movements in the Arab world are connected to the aspirations for the honest elections which people of Tehran called for, so there is a common path towards justice and political change (Parchami, 2012). Such constructive dialogue among Iranian leaders gave an indication about the convoluted politics of the region and the intertwined aspects of fight for democracy.

An Iraqi official who met with Qasim Suleimani believes that he wants to protect Iranian interests in Syria and Lebanon, which is why he is supporting the Assad government (Abbas, 2013). Iran aims to keep Assad in power to maintain its skill to utilize Syrian territory and resources to track its regional interests. The country plays a significant role in advising the Syrian military to support the Assad government. In May 2011, the U.S. Department of Treasury (USDOT) designated IRGC-QF commander Qassem Suleimani and operations and training commander Mohsen Chizari for their involvement in the violent repression of the Syrian people. It has been said that "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad, but Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Iranian regime's Quds Force" (Fulton et al., 2013).

Iran's military and financial support for the Assad regime

In this conflict, Iran's main goal has been to prop up the management of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This engagement involves use of different non-state actors such as the Fatemi Youn and Zainab Youn brigades. Iran has taken an endeavor to categorize itself as a strategic ally in the region and as a front-line shield within the axis of resistance.

Iran has also provided ground support and has been involved indirectly in the supporting of Russian military intervention. The country has also hired Shiite foreign fighters from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to boost the fears of the Syrian regime (Sönmez, 2022). The goal of Iran is the destruction of the opposition and regaining control in its own country and the strengthening of its position in the regional war. Hezbollah has performed these roles and supplied between 4,000 to 5,000 fighters that share Iran's strategic goals in Syria (Alfoneh, 2016). In the financial aspect, Iran has provided support to Syria estimated between 6 to 35 billion dollars (OŻAROWSKI, 2018).

Rouhani's Syria Policy: A delicate balance

After being sworn in, Hassan Rouhani nominated Mohammad Javad Zarif for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to continue negotiations for the diplomatic settlement of the Syrian conflict (Al-Moussawi, 2017). Rouhani stated a willingness to begin the alteration of Iran's foreign policy, stressing at his first press conference that it must be the Syrian people who decide their political future. Anyway, in an interview with Radio Europe, Rouhani declared, "The solution to the Syrian crises is not centered on the fate of the president Bashar al-Assad, but on the need for a strong state in Syria to fight against terrorism, we must all make



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efforts to eradicate terrorism in Syria and work to restore peace and stability to the region” (“Syria Solution Should Not Only Be about Assad: Rouhani,” 2015). During an interview with Chuck Todd from NBC News, Rouhani further explained that ‘What is of utmost importance is to understand that Syria does not have a military solution, and the Syrian problems must certainly be resolved politically. Only politically’. Rouhani added “The rule of the ballot box and the rule of Syrian people and the will of the Syrian people should be the sole determinant of the future of the country” (Todd, 2016).

Rouhani again supported Assad after the US missile attack on the Shayrat airbase in Homs’s province April 7, 2017, in response to a chemical attack in Khan Sheik Houn that killed many civilians including children (Solomon, 2017). Rouhani assured that Iran stands with Syria in its fight against terrorism and will not allow terrorists to take control of the country. He emphasized that Russia should support them in this situation and warned that those who back terrorists for their own interests will ultimately face defeat (AFP, 2017).

The administration of President Rouhani can therefore be described as having had a multi-layered policy concerning the Syrian conflict: supporting the ruling regime, while seeking a political outcome to the conflict. Rouhani downplayed the idea of the Syrian people choosing their own future and focused on fighting terrorism instead of Assad’s destiny. Iran also supplied support to the people in the form of military and financial aid towards the Syrian government as a way to increase regional stability.

The Iran-Russia axis in Syria: A new era of military cooperation

Military cooperation between Iran and Russia was between the years 2015-2018 to bolster the Assad regime against Sunni Jehadic entities in Syria. From the start of this relationship, their cooperation was military and strategic as both countries needed stability in Syria to retain their impact on regional arena and prevent the United States’ agenda of regime change and weakening Iran through proxies such as Hezbollah. Finally, this cooperation not only strengthened the Assad regime but also promoted the strategic stability of the Middle East since the Arab Spring, which indicated the new distribution of power in this region.

Iran deployed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps- Quds Force (IRGC-QF) to assist the Assad regime through creating the Shiite Liberation Army to fight against militias opposed to Assad (Akbarzadeh et al., 2023). Russia likewise has been providing military support particularly after intervening in 2015 that helped turn the tide against rebels and defend a military base in Syria, and to protect its business interests in oil and natural gas. Both Iran and Russia contributed to financing and supplying, which allowed the Assad regime to continue the military actions during the time when economic sanctions and external warfare had exhausted their resources (Charap et al., 2015).

The Syrian stance on Iran’s nuclear program

Iran has a nuclear program under construction that presents many difficulties and threats to peace and order in Arabian Peninsula, Israel, and indeed Europe (Al-Rawashdeh & Al-Hdrami, 2011). As Iran understands the NPT and assures not to develop nuclear weapon, but if it becomes member of nuclear weapon state its role in shaping the strategic environment of Middle East, South



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and Central Asian regions will impact significantly. This shift could encourage other states in the region, including, Saudi Arabia Turkey and possibly Egypt, to follow suit and build their nuclear arsenal that could lead to continuous arms race in the region. This case points to the necessity of an intensive diplomatic work to promote the compliance with the NPT, and the mitigation of the factors which could precipitate the states towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons capabilities. This follows the fact that the world, especially the United States, will continue to work together in order to ensure that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons, while at the same time engaging in consistent dialogue and cooperation in the formation of a secure and stable Middle East.

In particular, the attitude towards Iranian nuclear program has formed one of the major aspects of the Syrian's foreign policy. Syria has cultivated closeness with Iran as a means of being far from Western countries, hence tightening its relations with regional states. This transition can be explained as a conscious choice which was made due to the pressures of isolation and constant warfare on the international level. Syria has repeatedly voiced support for the Iranian nuclear option, asserting the nuclear power right for civilian use. Syrian leadership actively opposes the pressure from the West on Iran and interprets the actions of the United States and Europe as neo-imperialistic efforts to undermine the nations' sovereignty(Phillips, 2011). The Assad regime is perfectly justified in perceiving the sanctions and military threats to Iran as unjust, as Iran is seen as playing an important role in counterbalancing the Israeli air power dominance in the Middle East. However, many of these countries, including Iraq and Lebanon, which have historically had close relations with both Syria and Iran, also largely agree with this view, believing that a nuclearized Iran serves as a check against Israeli and Western aggression. On the other hand, countries in the Gulf region particularly Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have been perturbed by the possibility of Iran possessing nuclear technology since they would feel that that shift in the balance of power in that region is dangerous to them.

Rebuilding Syria: Iran's ambitious plans and investments

In January 2018, Ali Akbar Velayati announced that Bashar al-Assad had approved the establishment of a branch of Islamic Azad University in various cities of Syria(Majidyar, 2018). In February 2019, the president of Iran welcomed Bashar al-Assad for a meeting in Tehran, where he expressed that " Iran is ready to help rebuild Syria". The Iranian president affirmed to Bashar al-Assad Iran's strong commitment to support Syria in its reconstruction efforts and facilitate the repatriation of Syrian refugees to their homeland("Rouhani Meets Assad, Says Iran Ready to Help Rebuild Syria," 2019). During this pivotal period, Iran successfully engaged a series of strategic agreements and memorandums with Syria , aimed at revitalizing the country's electricity sector and securing Iran's economic foothold in Syria's future reconstruction. The plan includes a 540-megawatt power plant in Latakia. Additionally, a 90-megawatt power station will be rehabilitated in the Deir al-Zor province. Work will also focus on enhancing the performance of the Jandar Generating Plant in Homs(*Iran Signs Deal to Repair Syria's Power Grid*, 2017). In Binas 5 gas power plants (each with capacity of 125MW) will built(Ebrahimi, 2017). Iranian Deputy Minister of Energy Sattar Mahmoudi declared these ambitious plans in Tehran that the



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purpose of these contracts is to help Syria in the field of electricity. Sattar Mahmoudi confidently stated that the value of the contracts will exceed 188.75 million, with Iran fully committed to assisting Syria in the reconstruction of its water and sewage facilities. Syrian Electricity Minister Mohammad Zuhair Kharbouti expressed his appreciation for Iran's efforts in supporting Syria's reconstruction efforts, highlighting the importance of this collaboration, Kharbouti stated that these Iranian companies are professional and will support Syria in the energy sector (*Iran to Rebuild Syrian Power Plants*, 2017). Syria agrees to allow Iran to build gas station on 5,000 hectares (12,355 acres) of land, Syria will also Provide an additional 5,000 hectares for agriculture development and enable the operation of the Shaqiya phosphate mine. Iranian companies will also gain access to Syrian coastal ports, strengthening economic cooperation between the two countries. (Sharafedin & Francis, 2017).

Iran's strategic influence in Syria: Demographic changes and property rights

Before 2011, Syria had a population of 21 million. However, after 8 years of conflict, 5 million people have fled the country and more than 6 million are internally displaced, mostly in Idlib province and northern Syria (Al Asali et al., 2019). This displacement was a deliberate tactic employed by the regime and its allies to reassert control over the nation. Widespread forced displacement occurred in Homs, Damascus, Aleppo, and the surrounding countryside, aimed at effecting significant demographic changes. According to Bassam Quwwatly, the president of Ahrar, Iran's goal behind the demographic changes in Syria is to establish connections with Lebanon, Iraq, and the Mediterranean Sea. To achieve this, Iran aims to promote the Shia sect in Syria, which would provide support for Iran in the event that relations between the two countries deteriorate in the future (Arfeh, 2019).

In 2017, a landmark agreement was reached between the terrorist groups Hayat Tahir-al-Sham (HTS) and Ahrar al-Sham, and the Islamist government and its allies Hezbollah and Iran. This agreement revolves around the resolution of four long-conflicted towns Zabadani, Madaya, Kafraya and Fua. Both sides have pledged to exchange prisoners for residents of Kafraya and Fua in Idlib and to facilitate the relocation of residents of Madaya and Zabadani in the Damascus countryside. Iran's goal is clear: to protect its interests in the region by settling key figures loyal to the Shiite government close to the capital. This strategic move also intended to force the opposition residents from the eastern suburb of Damascus, namely Eastern Ghouta, to Idlib and bring the dismantling of the long-standing opposition control to the neighboring areas (Arfeh, 2019). In that same vein, Iran continues to actively seek the creation of a 'Shiite' neighborhood within Damascus. In this regard, the Iranian government has bought land and started building what is now referred to as the "Damascus Belt" around the city of Syria (Kattan, 2023). The current project includes the southern and the southwestern suburbs of Damascus; thus, it may be seen as Iran's willingness to tighten its control over the region.

This politically significant process of segmentation is taking place in Damascus with the help of Tehran, where Afghan, Pakistani, and Iraqi militia families are settled (Akhmedov, 2024). In November 2019, a "Syrian-Iranian joint committee"



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was held in Tehran in order to explore opportunities for cooperation in construction on the development of suburbs and cities. On this respect, Iran is keen on protecting the shrines and the security of what it describes as the “Syrian Shiites”(Peisch & Rahim, 2020). As far as these objectives are concerned, the Assad regime has been busy working with Iran to accomplish demographic engineering in Syria particularly through the enactments of Law No. 10 and amendments of Article of Law No. 11 of 2011. The two laws of Syria that caused significant controversy are Law No. 10 and Law No.11, owing to questions of property rights and influence from foreign ownership, especially that of Iran. According to Law No. 10 signed on April 2, 2018, the use of the state’s ownership right for expropriation of the properties in territories wherein individuals have been evicted is permissible(Unruh, 2016). This has raised concerns that Syrians may lose their properties, hence the same properties being sold to foreigners at a cheap and affordable price. Law No. 11, which was changed on February 17, 2021, deregulates the foreign ownership of freehold interest in residential land, which allows foreigners to own more than one apartment(sfuturem, 2024). This change has raised concerns that some Iranian entities may use these laws to seize Syrian properties. Information from the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) shows that the Syrian regime and Iranian militias have already taken over 440,000 Dunam agricultural land in Hama and Idlib(*Public Auctions of Forcibly Displaced People’s Lands Are Another Syrian Regime Method to Seize Its Opponents’ Property in a Widespread and Deliberate Manner*, 2021). This has led to Syrians being expelled from their homes and the destruction of their property.

Raisi Historic Visit to Syria: Securing oil and trade agreements

Syrian Observer, on 3 May 2023, the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi pays a two-day official visit to Syria coupled with an extensive economic and political team. During this visit, he met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, where they engaged in agreements focused on oil and other key sectors. As reported by Al-Jazeera journalist Dosra Jabbari, both countries have signed fifteen economic agreements(Al Jazeera, 2023). A railway company in Iran is also interested in connecting its network to Iraq and Syria to enhance Trade. Raisi confidently stated to Assad, “Syria’s government and people have gone through great hardship, today we can say that you have overcome all these problems and were victorious, despite the threats and sanctions imposed against you”(Syria, Iran Sign Long-Term Oil, Trade Agreements, 2023). Syrian activist Abdul-Kafi Al-Hamdo expressed that, the visit of the Iranian president to Syria aims to demonstrate Iran's dominance in the country rather than engage in the economic sector. Iran is effectively seeking recognition for its efforts in Syria.(Al Jazeera, 2023). The U.S. State Department confidently asserts that the strengthening relationship between Iran and the Syrian government poses a significant threat that demands urgent attention from the global community.

Syrian deteriorating relations with Iran

On April 1, 2024, Israel launched a targeted attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus, resultant in the assassination of Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahidi and the deaths of several notable Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps



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(IRGC) commanders (Bowen & Gritten, 2024). This incident has raised hopes that the Syrian government could reveal important data about the movements of Iranian military leaders in Syria, while raising serious doubts about the trust between Tehran and Damascus. Assad received a serious warning from Israel in response: If Syria is used as a base of operations against them, Israel will decide to destroy Assad's base. It is important to note that many agreements between Iran and Syria have failed, while Syria's cooperation with Moscow has been more successful. The Director General of the West Asia Trade Development Organization, Abdul Amir Rouhani, said that Iran exported \$244 million to Syria in 2023, an example of the expectations for economic cooperation between the two countries (The Syrian-Iranian Relationship: Where Is It Heading? 2024).

An official from Iran expressed his views on Syria, stating that Iran should focus on strengthening its position in Syria, where it currently faces no competition. He emphasized that if Iran does not take action now, it may encounter difficulties in developing future economic relations with Syria (The Syrian-Iranian Relationship: Where Is It Heading? 2024). A researcher from Syria stated that Syrian traders are not interested in Iranian products because they consider those products to be of low quality. Therefore, Iran should address this issue and offer better quality products to Syrian traders (Mena Research Center, 2024).

Assad Regime collapse: Implications for Iran and the region

On November 27, 2024, two suicide bombing attacks shook the cities of Idlib and Aleppo, claimed by the Hayat Tahrir-al-Sham (HTS) organization led by Abu Muhammad Al-Julani. The rebel organization backed by the Syrian democratic force and the Syrian national army, made significant gains capturing Hama on the 30th November and launching attacks on the Aleppo city on the same day (*More than 130 Killed as Syrian Rebels Seize Territory from Army in Aleppo Province*, 2024). Iran's Zainab Youn brigade and Fatmiyoun brigade fought against the rebels. On 1st December 2024, Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi left for a meeting with Assad in Damascus and pledged that Iran would support Assad's regime in his counteroffensive against the rebels. Abbas Araghchi was quoted as saying before he set off for Damascus "We firmly support the Syrian army and government; the Syrian army will once again be victorious over these terrorist groups as in the past" (Gubash & Clayton, 2024).

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian also reaffirmed Iran's readiness to bolster Syria, on December 2, 2024, during a phone call to Bashar al-Assad he said "The Islamic republic is ready to provide all kinds of support to eradicate terrorism and thwart the goals of its sponsors" (Hashem, 2024). Iran's ministry of foreign affairs blamed the U.S and Israel for exacerbating the situation in Syria. On December 8, 2024, Assad's regime collapsed, with that Iranian embassy was ransacked while Iranian diplomats fled the country (MAKOOI, 2024). Assad was a key member of "axis of resistance" and Iran had invested so much in his era. Former lawmaker Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh said that Iran should rejoice at the fall of its long-standing ally. Heshmatollah said "No one will be able to waste Iran's dollars for maintaining a spider web any more". Ebrahim Motaghi, a lecturer of international relations at Tehran University said on a talk show that Iran had been reduced from regional power to merely another country (Fassihi, 2024).



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The Future of Iran-Syria relations: Challenges and opportunities

Ayatollah Khamenei stated after the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, "What has happened in Syria is the result of a joint American and Zionist plan. The more pressure you apply to the resistance front, the stronger it becomes. The more crimes you commit, the more determined it becomes. The more you fight against it, the more it expands. And I tell you, with the help and power of God, the scope of resistance will encompass the entire region more than ever before" (Wintour, 2024).

Here are some important points regarding the future of relations among Syria and Iran:

- With the axis of resistance being dismantled and Russia unable to defend one of its close allies, it will be interesting to see how Iran responds after witnessing the fall of the Assad regime. They must be asking themselves, "Are we next?"
- The collapse of the Assad regime could easily plunge Iran and the rest of the world into an unprecedented state of uncertainty in the region. This situation could present both opportunities and dangers.
- Iran hopes that the Al-Qaeda roots of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) will come to light, ultimately leading to the restoration of a regime in Syria that is friendly to Iranian regional hegemony.

Conclusion

The interaction between Iran and Syria dates back to the interests of both the states after Islamic revolution of 1979 and has now transformed into strategic cooperation more specifically in order to check the influence of United States of America and Israel. During the Syrian civil war, Iran was actively involved helping the Syrian administration directly through military support and financial assistance in the form of loans to make up for the volatile economic situation in the country during the war. However, Iran provided funding to the Assad regime bilaterally as well as within the framework of a tripartite union with Russia and this plantation helped produce a measure of strategic stability in the region. Likewise, during Iran's nuclear programme, Syria provided diplomatic support to the country claiming that the relation was reciprocal.

Iran has also participated in reconstruction of Syria: thus, the Iranian leadership guarantees Bashar al-Assad further support for the construction of the country. For instance, Iran has started projects like the power plants and has signed agreements that are even in the fields of oil and trades which all had purposes of building up the economic base of Syria. Going forward, how this relationship will further shift is going to be important to monitor because of signals that could emerge in the context of changes related to the Assad regime. It will be particularly insightful to observe how both countries manage their bilateral relations as well as their approaches to reception of the western impact in the region.

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