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Iran's connections with Syria; current status and future perspective

Desperate not to let the Assad regime fall, Tehran continues to support and strengthen connections with its ally in Damascus. What unites them in this alliance?

[Seyed Ali Alavi](#)

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Iranian Ambassador Ghadanfar Rokn Abadi announcing aid to Syrian refugees. Demotix/Issam Abdallah. All rights reserved

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the Islamic Republic of Iran has become a vital and critical player within the Syrian political arena. Iran is perceived by many political commentators as a more major supporter of the Damascus regime than even the Russian Federation. What are the roots of Iran's connections with Syria, its main strategic preferences and targeted objectives?

After the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and throughout the 1980s, Syria (under president Hafiz al-Assad) was the only Arab state which supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. In the early 1980s, when Israel invaded Lebanon, Iran dispatched 1500 Revolutionary Guards to Syria with Damascus granting them direct access to the borders with Lebanon. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards offered training and funding to the local Shia communities in Lebanon and subsequently a concrete anti-Israeli front came into existence with joint Iranian-Syrian support. Syria's support for Iran during the Iran-Iraq war weakened Baghdad's position and helped Iran to gain a footstep in Lebanon and to expand its influence within the Levant. Iran's aim is to export its ideological and revolutionary messages throughout the region and to create a buffer zone around the state of Israel via Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic factions. To this end, Syria remains a vital ally for the Iranian clerical leadership who do not recognise Israel as a legitimate state in the region.

Throughout the 1990s Tehran and Damascus maintained strong ties and worked hand in hand to preserve a sustainable equilibrium within the region. In 2003, after the American-led invasion of Baghdad, Iran and Syria strengthened their relations even more in response to the United States' hostile attitudes towards Tehran and Damascus. However, Iran's relations with Syria are not limited to the political stage and both sides have been keen to cement their economic and cultural ties. Iran built petroleum and gas refineries in Syria and established a joint car industry with 80 per cent Iranian and 20 percent Syrian shares. Tehran and Damascus expanded their joint projects on the agricultural and industrial level. Iranian tourists and pilgrims visiting Syria boosted

Damascus' fragile economy. In parallel to economic and cultural ties, both sides strongly emphasise their strategic and geopolitical cooperation on Lebanon and Palestine.

The Iranian-Syrian connections are tied up with strategic and tactical dimensions grounded in a common ideology. The secular regime of Syria is mainly controlled by the Alawites, nevertheless, the Islamic Republic of Iran remains the only theocratic state to support the Assad regime. The aim of such a strong alliance is ultimately to overcome American-Israeli hegemony within the region and counterbalance the influence of the Arab regimes that have close ties with Washington such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

From Tehran's perception, Syria is significant for a number of reasons. First, Syria is a strategic gate allowing Iran to enter the Arab world. Second, Iran views Syria as a potential and reliable ally against the American-Israeli domination of the Middle East. Finally, the most important factor is that Syria is the "safe bridge" that facilitates Iran's access to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian rejectionist factions.

The position of Iran in regard to the current crisis in Syria is clear. Tehran makes considerable efforts to support Assad's regime to remain in power and survive the crisis. The Iranian backed Lebanese Hezbollah plays a critical role by sending its troops on the ground to fight the battle in Syria against anti-Assad forces with Iran's approval. Syria under President Bashar al-Assad tilted even more towards Iran than during the time of his father, Hafez-al Assad. This is mainly because Syria was deeply alarmed by the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and viewed American foreign policy in the region as a threat to its security. Hezbollah's military and political achievements during the war with Israel in 2006 have also incited Damascus to strengthen its connections with Iran and Hezbollah's leadership, to cement a buffer zone around Israel.

During the 'Arab Spring', the Syrian regime controlled by the Alawite minority confronted significant resistance throughout the country by a majority Arab-Sunni population that opposed the Assad family's four decades of absolute rule. The Syrian rebellion attracted sympathy throughout the Arab Sunni states as well as Turkey, and financial and logistical support was channelled to the Syrian anti-Assad forces by the Gulf Cooperation Council through Turkey. This issue hardened the situation for the Syrian regime and highlighted the significance of Iran as the most influential regional ally for Damascus.

Since the 2011 crisis in Syria, the political and military ties between Damascus and Tehran have significantly strengthened. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard has become the most influential external element in Syria by providing training and offering professional consultations to the Syrian army. The Revolutionary Guard's mounting influence became more visible when its corps logistically supported Hezbollah's paramilitary troops fighting on the ground to safeguard the Syrian regime.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is under increasing sanctions, engineered by the western powers, for its nuclear programme. Nevertheless, Tehran is not willing to witness the loss of its closest ally in the region. The fall of Assad's regime will have a negative impact on Iran's ability to expand its influence within the Arab world and reduce Iran's access to Hezbollah. For the Iranian government, Syria remains the safest path to Southern Lebanon, the power base of Hezbollah. The alternative route to Lebanon is either Turkey or through international sea lines.

Since Ankara pursues anti-Assad policies and competes with Tehran in the region, and since the western powers monitor the sea routes, such alternatives are unviable. The collapse of the Syrian regime would weaken Iran and Hezbollah's standing against their ideological enemy, Israel. The Iranian leadership is convinced that the fall of Assad's regime could incite the hardliners in Tel Aviv to conduct military operations against Hezbollah's power bases in Lebanon and even Iran's nuclear

facilities. In other words, supporting the current Syrian regime has its security and geopolitical significance for the Iranian leadership.

The recent news indicates that the balance of military power is changing in favour of pro-Assad forces. If President Bashar al-Assad with the triangular support network of Iran-Hezbollah and Russia remains in power and overcomes the crisis, Damascus inevitably will emerge as more dependent on Iran and Russia than before. Having most of its economy and infrastructure shattered during the civil war and being politically isolated regionally and internationally, the Assad regime has only Tehran and Moscow to count on to revive its severely exhausted economy and politically weakened government. However, Russia and Iran are currently facing increased sanctions imposed by the west and therefore are already heavily engaged in overcoming the financial impact of the sanctions. The question remains for the long term - to what extent are Iran and Russia able to renovate Syria's economy and respond to its financial needs?

The supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, who guides Iran's foreign policy, defines Syria as a vital element of the "Regional Axis of anti-Zionism". Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic of Iran pursues a pragmatic policy towards developments in Syria. Tehran views its strategic interests beyond President Bashar al-Assad. Although Iran strongly prefers al-Assad to remain as head of state in Syria, Tehran attempts to reach out to the ruling Alawite community and other minorities involved in the current system to maintain its interests in Syria. Tehran thoroughly looks into other possible scenarios and aims to facilitate the establishment of paramilitary forces such as the Al-Mahdi Army in Iraq and powerful political institutions such as the Al-Dawa party in Iraq, to preserve its influence in Syria and minimise the destruction of Syria's governmental agencies loyal to al-Assad's regime. To this end, Hezbollah remains an instrumental and crucial element. Tehran's main goal is to ensure that its channels to Hezbollah remain open and Iran's grand-interests in the Levant guarded and preserved.

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