



# The Syrian-Iranian Nexus: a Historical Overview of Strategic Cooperation

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By: Rafke Risseuw

## Abstract

*Syria and Iran have been joining forces for almost four decades and have had a major impact on the developments in the Middle East. The political alliance between Syria and Iran has sustained itself through a shared perception of threat, a convergence of interests in Lebanon and Iraq, and a common perspective regarding Palestine, Israel, and the United States. This strategic partnership has been channeled through mutual economic, diplomatic and political assistance in meeting each other's strategic needs. This research provides a historical overview of forty years of military, economic and diplomatic cooperation and aims at understanding the forces that have shaped the alliance between the two countries.*

## Introduction

The outbreak of the Syrian Crisis in 2011 meant a new chapter in the political history of the Iranian - Syrian nexus, as forty years of strategic partnership are put again to the test. The priorities of the two countries to coordinate their foreign policies are centered around their respective core priority which is regime survival. In order to pursue this, there is a strong focus on protecting national security and safe guarding the maintenance of the territorial integrity and independence of the two states.

The political alliance between Syria and Iran has sustained itself through a shared perception of threat, a convergence of interests in Lebanon and Iraq, and a common perspective regarding Palestine, Israel, and the United States. This strategic partnership has been channeled through mutual economic, diplomatic and political assistance in meeting each other's strategic needs. By pooling political leverage and military resources in building a network of surrogate militias, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, they have been able to frustrate the ambitions of opponents. Notwithstanding the differences and their divergence on ideological matters, such as religion and ethnicity, as well as their long term, regime specific goals, they have managed to enforce their positions on the regional chess board.

The following article will give a historic overview of the mutual economic, military and political cooperation over the three decades leading up to the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. In addition, it provides an analysis of the delicate, intra-alliance balance of power and how the relative regional position of the two countries has influenced their policy decisions. It will focus on regional key events and demonstrate the ways and channels in which the alliance was fueled and maintained. This historical overview will allow for a comparative analysis of the Iranian role in Syria in the next article, which will address Iranian activity in the Syria Crisis and which will assess the intra alliance balance after the Russian intervention in September 2015.

## Syria and Iran: 1979-2000

In the twenty years that projected Middle East into the 21st century (1980 - 2000), the region became increasingly fragmented. The idea of Pan-Arabism dissolved while the hope of acting independently from global power influence collapsed.<sup>1</sup> The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was a key regional event that led to the Pahlavi Shah being disposed. The deposition and ultimate exile of the Pahlavi Shah was a clear message to the United States of America that they were no longer going to be controlled by western interests. In the light of these changing dynamics, the Iranian-Syrian alliance must be understood as a response to these changes in the region.

The new government of Iran was an isolated island in the Middle East, opposed by various Arab states and the West.<sup>2</sup> The Arab world, in addition, was in state of confusion as Arab Nationalism, the binding glue of the Arab political order at the time, was gradually eroding.<sup>3 4</sup> As a result of these

<sup>1</sup> Cristin Cappelletti, "Dynamics of the Iranian Role in the Syrian Civil War." (2018), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Sun Degang, "Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 3, no. 2 (2009): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2009.12023132>.

<sup>3</sup> Fouad Ajami, "The End of Pan-Arabism," *Foreign Affairs*, December 1, 1978, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yemen/1978-12-01/end-pan-arabism>.

<sup>4</sup> The 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the impasse with the Palestinian issue, the lingering domestic conflict in Lebanon, incessant inter-Arab feuding, and Egypt's "defection" with the signing of the Camp David accords in March 1979 all led to the observation that pan-Arab solidarity's best days were over. See (J. M. Goodarzi 2009, 12).

changing regional dynamics, a regional bipolarity emerged, which was fueled by the Soviet Union and the US friction, and which defined the relations between Arab states, Israel, Turkey and Iran.

Although the Arab political order in the Middle East was hardly a consolidated block, there was unified anxiety over Iran's ability to export its radical ideology and therefore threaten the leaderships of each respective country. From the 1980s on, this led to the emergence of a Syria-Iran-Libya block, which was opposed to the Iraq- Saudi-Jordan cluster, rivaling regional leadership.<sup>5</sup>

Syria was quick to recognize the new Iranian administration, as it saw welcome opportunities to step up its regional role by balancing common enemies such as Iraq and Israel. In the Syrian- Iranian alliance, the conditions for cooperation were carefully balanced over an asymmetrical regional position. When it comes to their comprehensive national power in terms of population, territory, natural resources, size of army, and navy and air force, Iran is obviously superior to Syria.<sup>6</sup> However, when taking into account matters of security, Iran has more often been in confrontation with other regional and global powers. Unlike Iran, Syria's limited resources and the lack of a clear grand strategy that surpasses the regional borders makes Syrian hard- and soft power relatively limited in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> Aware of the limited natural resources and highly vulnerable to external pressure, Syria's decision-makers could not escape the reality that the country's natural and economic resources were too limited to support their FP ambitions without external assistance.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to its national security, Iran's main policy objectives are directed to being the primary player in both the Levant and the Arabian Gulf. This entails full support to Syria against Israel and the US, while the latter having veto power over Lebanese affairs in order to ensure the Lebanese government does not adopt policies that would be detrimental to Syrian, and therefore, Iranian interests.<sup>9</sup> Since the Lebanon war in 1982, Syria in addition, has provides Iran with vital strategic

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<sup>5</sup> Degang, "Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited," 69.

<sup>6</sup> Degang, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Rubin, "The Truth About Syria," in *The Truth About Syria* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Degang, "Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited," 76.

<sup>9</sup> Nader Ibrahim M. Bani Nasur, "Syria-Iran Relations (2000-2014)," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 12 (October 2014): 80.

depth, allowing it to project power through the Levant, and giving it a gateway to Hezbollah, enhancing Iranian deterrence of Israel. The confidence for Syrian reliance on Iran for geostrategic purposes, but also economic and energy assistance have been maintained over Damascus' believe in Tehran's commitment to the Assad regime as the vital bridge in securing its strategic interests in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

Another rationale for intensified Syrian-Iranian coordination is their common threats and enemies. The need to counter United States influence in the region, as well as Israel and Iraq, has driven Iran and Syria closer, despite evident opposite ideologies. One of the common threats in the 1980s was Ba'athist Iraq. Syrian- Iraqi relations have been problematic since the two countries took their present form after the Sykes–Picot Agreement. Although operating through similar Ba'athist principles, the historic rivalry was born out a fierce competition for regional, Arab leadership. This rivalry was fueled by allegations of involvement in each other's internal politics, disputes over the waters of Euphrates River, oil transit fees, and stances toward Israel.

The Iran-Iraq War was a first show case of how the Syrian Iranian nexus would develop into practice. Both Assad and the IRI saw close coordination of their policies as essential if they were to contain Iraq. When Saddam invaded Iran, Damascus started to provide valuable diplomatic and military support to Tehran. The alliance was formalized in March 1982 when a high-level Syrian delegation, headed by Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam, visited Tehran and concluded a series of bilateral agreements on oil and trade.<sup>11</sup> In addition, an opaque pact on military matters was signed, which allowed for supplies of heavy weapon material to be shipped from Syria to Iran.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Edited Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the," 2016, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Jubin Moazami Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment* (IB Tauris, 2009), 55.

<sup>12</sup> Goodarzi, 58.

Motivated by the unexpected success, Iran turned from a defensive to offensive strategy and invaded Iraq in July 1982 during operation Ramadan. The subsequent war of attrition polarized the Arab world while the global powers stepped up their efforts in supporting Saddam militarily. This put Iran and its ally Syria at the receiving end of the regional balance of power. However, Syria still relied on pre-war established regional relationships. These alliances strengthened Syria's hand, through the use of carrots and sticks, with Arab, and especially Gulf, countries. This enabled Damascus to ease tension on Iran diplomatically, while simultaneously providing it with ways to trade indirectly with the rest of the Arab League.<sup>13</sup>

In return, by early 1983, the Syrians established a military presence in the general headquarters of the Iranian Ministry of Defense, where they provided advice and intelligence on Iraqi military strategy, training and the use of Soviet weaponry.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Damascus attempted to weaken the Saddam regime economically, by cutting off the Iraqi oil pipelines, which cost Baghdad an estimated 17 million dollars' per day. It also dispatched Syrian troops to the Syria-Jordan border, forcing Iraq to prepare a war on its Western front.<sup>15</sup> This earned Damascus the appreciation of the Iranian clergy, military and people as well as security guarantees and a huge amount of energy assistance as compensation.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Tehran provided Syria with a total amount of four hundred million dollars' in the form of a grant as well as one million barrels of oil at a favorable price per year.<sup>17</sup>

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 proved to be a second battleground which allowed Syria and Iran to consolidate their alliance. In addition, this was an opportunity for the two countries to

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<sup>13</sup> Tabrizi and Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the," 15.

<sup>14</sup> Degang, "Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited," 70; Jubin Moazami Goodarzi, "THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN ALLIANCE: POWER POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST 1979-1989," n.d., 85.

<sup>15</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (Routledge, 2002), 95.

<sup>16</sup> Tabrizi and Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the," 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, 99–100.

coordinate their military efforts through mutual support for Lebanese Shia militias, most importantly Hezbollah, which introduced a new phase of the emerging partnership. Syria entered Lebanon in 1976 as part of an Arab peacekeeping force after the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war and was caught by surprise by the scale and scope of the Israeli attack. It was in need of support in order for its dominant position in Lebanon to prevail.<sup>18</sup> It was now Syria requiring Iran's assistance to keep Iraq in check on the Eastern front, while stepping up its engagement on the Lebanese civil war.

In view of its long time presence in Lebanon, Damascus was able to use the Lebanese war-economy to their advantage through providing Iran with much-needed strategic economic depth in Lebanon.<sup>19</sup> Facilitating Iranian access to the Lebanese quagmire gave Assad the necessary leverage to deploy Iranian resources in return to implement his 'Sword and Shield Strategy'. In this way, Iran was to serve Assad's offensive goals in Lebanon by exploiting the Islamic Republic's influence among the Lebanese Shi'a in order to wage a campaign of subversion, terror and guerrilla warfare against their mutual opponents.<sup>20 21</sup> For material support, Damascus could rely on the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> In the winter of 1982, two thousand Iranian Revolutionary guards were stationed in the Syrian held Bekaa Valley.<sup>23</sup> Over the course of time they established close links with radical Shi'a groups in the area such as Amal and Hezbollah. Lebanon provided further options for the Syria-Iran nexus to deepen their grip in the Levant and apply their forward defense strategy in the quest to expand their regional influence. For Iran, an active role in war-torn Lebanon seemed an opportunity to export its revolution and fight Israel and its Western allies. In addition to paramilitary personnel, the Iranians brought clerics to the region in order to expose the local Shi'a population to their brand of religious and ideological

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<sup>18</sup> William Harris, "Syria in Lebanon.," MERIP Reports, 1985, <https://www.merip.org/mer/mer134/syria-lebanon>.

<sup>19</sup> Tabrizi and Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the," 15.

<sup>20</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment*, 76–77.

<sup>21</sup> Among these mutual opponents were the Gemayel government, the Israelis and the US and French contingents of the Multinational Force in Lebanon. See (Goodarzi 2009,77)

<sup>22</sup> Bani Nasur, "Syria-Iran Relations (2000-2014)," 84.

<sup>23</sup> The New York Times, "Lebanon: The Iranian Presence," February 12, 1984, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/12/magazine/lebanon-the-iranian-presence.html>.

doctrine.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Iran provided Hezbollah with great financial and personnel support, so that Southern Lebanon became an essential buffer zone between Israel and Syria. With Syrian and Iranian help, these groups waged an effective, unconventional battle against the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), ultimately forcing the Israeli troops to withdraw from Lebanon.

In the aftermath of the cessation of hostilities in the first Gulf war, Saddam championed the war as a victory for Iraq. Baghdad had full support from Washington, which saw in the Arab leader a valuable ally —capable of containing the revolutionary Islamic tide rising from Tehran. The post-Cold War period witnessed the United States asserting itself more forcefully in the Middle East and the boost of Iraqi power and prestige in the Arab world made Iran's weakness and Syria's isolation even more visible. The Arab political order was quick to form new configurations of cooperation and the prospects for the Syrian-Iranian alliance didn't look good. While Syria was regionally isolated, Iran turned inwards trying to recover from an eight year long war that exhausted its economy and society.<sup>25</sup> On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait. An event, which, in Halliday's words was "*an act of inter-state war that divided the region itself and drew external forces into regional conflict more directly than at any time since 1918*".<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the loss of Damascus' main weapons provider encouraged Syria to search a deeper cooperation with the Islamic Republic. This importance of this decision was further emphasized by with Moscow's shifting strategy in the region from a "strategic partnership" to a "defensive sufficiency".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Yosef Olmert, "Iranian-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik.," *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, 1990, 180–81.

<sup>25</sup> Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment*, 288.

<sup>26</sup> F. Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 130.

<sup>27</sup> I Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus : State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth-Century Syria.*, 2008, 278.



The 1990 Damascus - Tehran axis was further institutionalized and consolidated by establishing the joint higher Syrian - Iranian Cooperation committee, chaired by their respective Vice presidents and Foreign ministers, aimed at boosting reciprocal economic and political cooperation<sup>28</sup>. In addition, Syria and Iran embarked upon a joint program to acquire the capability to manufacture ballistic, cruise and surface-to-surface missiles. This led to the successful establishment of manufacturing facilities in Hama and Aleppo.<sup>29</sup>

The perceived intra Arab war changed the political configuration in the Middle East drastically. Over the course of the 1990s the regional rivalry transformed in a competition led by pro-western Israel and Turkey on the one hand and Iran and Syria on the other.<sup>30</sup>

After the Gulf War in 1991, Iraqi military capabilities were severely weakened and so was its capacity to harm Syria and Iran. On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent American unipolarity made room for changing regional affiliations which resulted in new power blocks.<sup>31</sup> A strengthened Turkey-Israel-US strategic partnership arose. Over the course of the 1990s this rivalry transformed in a competition led by pro-western Israel and Turkey on the one hand and Iran and Syria on the other.<sup>32</sup> However, with a weakened Iran that turned inwards to focus on, among others, the recovery of its economy, Syria flirted strategically with other regional players.

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<sup>28</sup> Jubin M Goodarzi, "Changing Regional Environment" 4, no. 2 (2013): 46.

<sup>29</sup> Goodarzi, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Degang, "Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited," 79.

<sup>31</sup> David Wallsh, "Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity," 2013, 113–14.

<sup>32</sup> Degang, "Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited," 69.

## Syria and Iran: 2000-2011

Just before Hafez al Assad's death, Syria and Turkey tightened their ties to each other. These changing relations did not foster the Iranian- Syrian nexus but as long as Israel and the US were prominently present in the region, Syria and Iran were potential targets to be handled. Hence, the necessity for cooperation remained.<sup>33</sup> Bashar al Assad, who took office after his father's death in 2000, initially presented a promising facade of a modernizing, young ruler who spoke surprisingly openly about political and economic reforms. The legacy of Hafez al Assad's strategical maneuvering with other regional peers, allowed Syria to take the lead in the alliance over the course of the 1990s which was illustrated by the ability to dictate Iranian behavior in Lebanon with regard to Hezbollah.<sup>34</sup> In the beginning of the 2000s the Syrians balanced its power with different regional stakeholders and eased tensions with the West. Bashar's rule, however, was immediately faced with the repercussions of the 2001, 9/11 events and the subsequent war on terror ambitions of the Bush administration.

This set into motion a series of events that affected the Middle East as a whole and Syria in particular. Bashar had to deal with challenges that were unprecedented in the Al Assad ruling history. In the context of a looming war in Iraq, Damascus was even suspicious of the Iranian interests in a potential, Post-Saddam Iraq. The Iranian response was to continue to develop ties with Syria while waiting out Syrian dominance within their partnership.<sup>35</sup> This led to the signing of a bilateral industrial cooperation agreement in April 2002, and the establishment of a \$50 million fund to finance joint ventures with Syrian private manufacturers.<sup>36</sup> The speed of US military victory in the 2003 US led invasion of Iraq caused major concerns for the two allies. It was clear from both Bush's axis of evil speech in 2002 in which he named Iran as one of the major terrorism states that Iran effort's in

<sup>33</sup> Degang, "Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited"; Fred H. Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance," *Middle East Journal* 61, no. 1 (2007): 29–47.

<sup>34</sup> Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance," 70.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Lawson, 36.

fighting alongside US forces in Afghanistan didn't mean it was off the hook.<sup>37</sup> Syria in addition, was warned to be next on the American War on Terror's list, as Washington intelligence accused Damascus of owning Weapons of Mass Destruction shipped to Syria from Iraq before the arrival of UN's inspector.<sup>38</sup> It was clear that Syria and Iran were compelled to cooperate and coordinate operations in Iraq in order to challenge the US presence in the region. Assad started to adopt a more hostile attitude towards Washington and allowed the passage of Sunni fighters into Iraq to challenge the US invasion (New York Times, 2007). At the same time Iran tried to cultivate and maintain ties with all the major Iraqi political parties, particularly the Shia ones. This was to ensure that the new government in Baghdad would not assume a hostility stance towards Tehran.<sup>39</sup>

However, the 2003 fall of Saddam, turned the tables for Iran. The country enjoyed a gradual ease of tensions on its borders with the removal of its arch enemies in both Afghanistan, in 2001, and Iraq. Moreover, Iran finally saw its efforts bear fruit in Lebanon, where the elevation of Hezbollah's regional status was confirmed in an increasingly consolidated position in the Lebanese political sphere.<sup>40</sup> In speeding up further advance on the regional level, Iran embarked on a campaign of guarded conciliation toward the new, Post-Saddam Iraq.<sup>41</sup> Damascus' suspicion towards Tehran's moderate steps to conciliate its long-standing regional and global adversaries, as the latter was approaching both Baghdad and Washington, triggered parallel efforts on Damascus's part to strengthen relations with Iraq and the US. However, while Iran's rapprochement with Iraq progressed,

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<sup>37</sup> George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 29, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111011053416/http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540>.

<sup>38</sup> Ed Vulliamy, "Syria Could Be Next, Warns Washington," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/apr/13/syria.iraq1>.

<sup>39</sup> Goodarzi, "Changing Regional Environment," 48.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria* (Yale University Press, 2016), 151.

<sup>41</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran-Iraq Relations after Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2003): 125–26.

Damascus's overtures to Washington were rebuffed, resulting in an intra-alliance race for influence in a new Iraq.<sup>42</sup>

That led to a competing Iranian -Syrian efforts to revive and re-establish commercial and transportation links to postwar Iraq. Syria found itself at the receiving end of the intra alliance balance of power as its pivotal role between Iran and the region was undermined now that Iran enjoyed a greater space for maneuvering. Syria responded to this vacuum by stepping up its role in the Syrian Iranian alliance and dictating the rules of the political game in Lebanon, actively strengthening Hezbollah's role in Lebanese politics.<sup>43</sup> Such moves complemented efforts on Damascus's part by reviving ties with Tehran. A memorandum of understanding concerning the possibility of creating a free trade area to link the two countries was signed during Khatami's visit to Damascus in May 2003.<sup>44</sup> Further plans to set up a higher committee to promote bilateral trade and investment were announced in September of the same year.<sup>45</sup>

Following the assassination of the Lebanese ex-premier Rafiq Hariri and allegations of Syrian involvement in his death, a public uprising, the so-called Cedar Revolution swept the country. The Syrian stronghold over the country became untenable and the last Syrian troops were forcibly withdrawn early spring of 2005.<sup>46</sup> The humiliation after its forced withdrawal from Lebanon coincided with significant dwindling oil exports and an ailing economy as a result. Syria needed to revive its regional strategic partnership. Plans were made to set up a free trade zone in order to encourage greater bilateral trade. In addition, Syrian prime minister Muhammad Naji 'Utri traveled to the Iranian capital to confer with senior officials on ways to counter charges that Syria was responsible for the

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<sup>42</sup> Nabil Yassin, "Normal Relations, Not Just a Card," *Al Hayat*, December 12, 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance," 40.

<sup>44</sup> IRNA, "Iran and Syria Sign Free Trade Agreement," *BBC Monitoring International*, May 14, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance," 40.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 38.

assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.<sup>47</sup> The visit ended with 'Utri and Iranian Vice President Muhammad Reza Aref declaring that the two countries had concluded a mutual defense pact.<sup>48</sup>

Syria managed to gradually strengthen its regional position after 'losing Lebanon'.<sup>49</sup> When Hezbollah showed impossible to defeat by Israeli forces during the 2006 Lebanon War, the 'Axis of Resistance' regional street reputation was in the lift. With an ideological basis from the narrative of "resistance" against the United States and Israel, the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance had given Syria a moral boost ready for instrumentalization in Assad's favor at home while Iran ensured strategic depth at the heart of the Arab world.<sup>50</sup> Assad, although strictly complying with a delicate balance between relations with the Gulf States and what he saw as his ideological commitments, worked to improve its relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Attempts were made to open up economically, cautiously privatizing state companies while Syria used its new role with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to attract foreign investment from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike his crafty father, who strategically kept a delicate equilibrium between the interests of Iran and Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Bashar was unable to maintain equilibrium between the interests of Iran and the Arabs, particularly Saudi Arabia.<sup>52</sup> The closer he moved toward Iran, the further he moved away from most Arab countries and the West. This led to Syrian attempts to tie itself more vastly to its historic, strategic partner, resulting in an increase of support on different

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<sup>47</sup> Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance," 41.

<sup>48</sup> Ewen MacAskill and Duncan Campbell, "Iran and Syria Confront US with Defence Pact," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2005; Roula Khalaf and Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Syria and Iran Join Forces against Threats," *Financial Times*, February 16, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> The New York Times, "Lebanese Government Dissolved Amid Opposition Protests - The New York Times," 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/28/international/middleeast/lebanese-government-dissolved-amid-opposition.html>.

<sup>50</sup> M. Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(Ism).," *The Washington Quarterly* 36(4) (2013): 83.

<sup>51</sup> Tabrizi and Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the," 15.

<sup>52</sup> Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(Ism).," 82.

domains.<sup>53</sup> Militarily, this has led to the signing of a mutual defense pact in June 2006 and an additional military cooperation agreement in March 2007.<sup>54</sup> These included Iranian missiles sales to Syria in addition to intelligence cooperation with Tehran reportedly providing equipment and training to Syrian operatives.<sup>55</sup> In addition, direct Iranian investment increased significantly, with the two countries signing trade and economic cooperation agreements representing potentially \$1–\$3 billion in direct Iranian investment, covering various domains, from telecommunications to agriculture and petroleum. Moreover, an increased level of cultural exchange and cooperation can be witnessed, with Iran pouring significant amounts of financial means into the restoration of Shiite shrines located across Syria while boosting Iranian religious tourism to visit those shrines.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

In above provided historical time line we have seen that Syria has long been considered an important ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Through military and trade agreements the two partners cemented their alliance, aimed to serve their individual short-term gains while never losing sight of common long term interests. This was demonstrated during the Iran-Iraq war in which Syria used its Soviet connection to serve as an important lifeline in providing military assistance to Iran. Also, in Lebanon they successfully coordinated military efforts through mutual support for Lebanese Shia militias. With the creation of Hezbollah they succeeded in creating a proxy, with significant military leverage which overtime transformed into a legitimate actor in Lebanese politics. The new millennium introduced a new Syrian head of state and drastic geopolitical and regional changes. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the binary power relations of the cold war disappeared. After a short

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<sup>53</sup> Milani, 82.

<sup>54</sup> Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance," 37.

<sup>55</sup> M Yacoubian, "Syria's Alliance with Iran.," USIP Peace Briefing, USIP Peace Briefing, 2007, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2007/05/syrias-alliance-iran>.

<sup>56</sup> Yacoubian; Bani Nasur, "Syria-Iran Relations (2000-2014)," 81.

period of US unipolarity, an increasingly multipolar Middle East emerged, in which a strengthened US-Israeli block and a maintained Iran-Saudi rivalry defined the regional dynamics.

Iran entered the 21st century in an initial weaker position but the 2003 overthrow of Ba'athist Iraq and its initiatives of strengthening Shia' groups gave its power projection a serious boost. Syria, in the meanwhile struggled with the challenges of a region in turmoil. After the killing of Lebanese prime-minister Hariri its forced withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 it lost the few connections it had among regional peers. This led to Syrian attempts to tie itself more vastly to Tehran through mutual beneficial trade agreements and informal defense pacts. In addition, in its efforts to actively strengthen Hezbollah's role in Lebanese politics and through religious cultural exchanges. In this way, it ensured the protection by a more powerful entity. In the 3 decades of Syrian- Iranian strategic alliance, the two states alternately benefited the weakness of the other by carefully balancing the checks and balances that defines the nature of the relation between them.

The Iranian response to the Syrian weakness of the first decade of the 21st century, has led to the observation that in the current Syrian equation, Iran is expecting something back for supporting the Syrians during the course of the 2000s and since the early days of the Syrian conflict. In other words, it is payback time for Tehran. For the follow- up article, these findings will serve as a reference for the comparative analysis of the Iranian role in the Syrian crisis before and after Russia stepped in militarily in September 2015. This event has potentially a big impact on Syrian-Iranian relations and the next paper will explore to what extent the alliance is subject to a ceiling.

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