

Instability in Syria: *Iran's domestic and foreign policy concerns*

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Abstract

The article examines instability in Syria in terms of Iran's foreign and domestic policy challenges, arguing that if Assad falls, the replenishment of Hezbollah's weapons will become much more difficult, threatening Hezbollah's military stamina. From the Iranian perspective, what is certain is that this could seriously impede any plans which Iran has in terms of using Hezbollah as a second strike capability in case of an Israeli attack.

Further, the author presents two lines of analysis: first, Bashar Al Assad's regime gave Iran political backing in Iraq against Saudi interests, but if Assad's regime falls, the next Syrian government is much likelier to be pro-Saudi and quite possibly pro-American. Second, if Syria manages to overthrow Assad, should the economic deterioration in Iran continue unabated, Iranians can say: if the people of Syria could overthrow Assad, its possible for us to do the same with Khamenei's regime.

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When it comes to the Arab Spring, the country that worries Iran's leaders the most is Syria.

The government of supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei has well-founded fears about the current uprising against the Assad regime in Syria, given the unique historical relationship between Iran and Syria.

Since the beginning of Iran's 1979 revolution, only a tiny number of Iranian tourists have visited places such as Tunisia, Egypt or Yemen, where the recent Arab Spring revolutions took place. Although relations with Moammar Qaddafi's regime in Libya were good during the 1980s, only a small of Iranian government officials visited, and virtually no tourists. However, the same cannot be said for Syria.

In Iran, All Politics is Local

Since the beginning of the revolution, hundreds of thousands of average Iranians have visited Syria, from all strata of society. It is possible that this figure reached more half a million.

One reason for Syria's popularity as a tourist destination has been the ease of travel. Syria has been one of the few countries in the world that does not require Iranians to obtain visas. Even Lebanon requires Iranians to obtain visas, despite the billions of dollars Hezbollah has received over

the years. In fact, so many Iranians visited Syria that the Iranian government decided to invest in several hotels in Damascus.

The other is religious affiliation. The Encyclopedia Britannica describes Alawites as "any member of a minority sect of Shī'ite Muslims living chiefly in Syria".¹ In fact, the name Alawi is taken from the name of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shi'ite Imam.

For many years during Saddam Hussein's rule, Iraq's holy Shi'ite sites were out of reach to Iranians. As a result, many Iranian pilgrims went to the Sayede Zeynab shrine in Damascus instead. This is the shrine where the daughter of Imam Ali, the first Shi'ite Imam is buried.

Affordable tourism to Syria was also part of the Iranian government's efforts to strengthen ties with its people and its government. As the two were politically close, the Iranian government encouraged many of its citizens to travel there, as a means of deepening the sense of solidarity between the two countries and governments; for this reason, many such trips from Iran were subsidized. In the Muslim school (Martyr Mohammad Bagher Sadr ²) that I attended in Tehran during 1984-85, the winner of the annual Koran competition and his fam-

¹ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/12399/Alawite>

² <http://region2.tehran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=252&ctl=viewdetails&mid=699&CityInfold=5725>

ily were given a free trip to Syria. The same applied to many government ministries and religious organizations, where many workers and members received subsidized trips. Some were sent by air, others were sent overland on buses via Turkey.

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Some actually continued to travel by bus despite the outbreak of civil war last year. This means of travel was only stopped after a number of incidents in which Iranian pilgrims were kidnapped in Syria, in January 2012.³

The Iranian public’s special familiarity with Syria has increased over the years also in light of the fact that many Iranians have worked in Syria in various sectors, including agriculture, construction and the automotive industry. The Iranian government car producer Iran Khodro has one of its biggest foreign-based car production plants there. This means that thousands of Iranian technicians and specialists have lived in Syria for some duration.

These ties mean that of all the nations in the region, the people of Iran best relate to the people of Syria. Further-

³ <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4184048,00.html>

more, the regimes have a number of distinct similarities, including their hostility to Israel, closeness to Hamas and strained relations with the West at various points.

Prior to the uprising in Syria, this closeness was a source of strength for the Iranian regime. It brought its public closer to a regime which had similar political views as well as a number of shared geo-strategic interests.

However, after the recent uprising, the Syrian connection has become a threat for the Iranian regime. The reason for this is both simple and is of great concern to Ayatollah Khamenei: the people of Iran could see Assad’s fall as inspiration for a new domestic revolution. Should the economic deterioration in Iran continue unabated, Iranians could say: if the people of Syria were able to overthrow Assad, it is possible that we could do the same with Khamenei’s regime.

This threat is the main reason Khamenei is helping Assad to crush the uprising at home. The Iranian regime wants to send an internal message along the lines that “if you dare follow the example of the Syrian people, expect to be crushed and killed as they are being.” By sending this message, Khamenei hopes to prevent any such uprising in his own country. To bolster this strategy, the regime has recently changed tactic, and as of June this year, has openly admitted

that its elite Revolutionary Guards Quds force is operating in Syria.⁴

Concerns for an Ally in Lebanon

For years Iran has used Syrian territory to transfer heavy weaponry to Hezbollah, especially Hezbollah's

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missile arsenal. The missiles were generally loaded onto Iranian ships or aircraft and offloaded on Syrian territory for land transfer to Hezbollah via Syrian territory.

The reason that these weapons are not transported directly to Lebanon and offloaded there is the presence of Sunni and Christian political forces in Lebanon, who are both opposed to the re-arming of Hezbollah. Any such effort by Iran could create domestic backlash against Hezbollah inside Lebanon. Furthermore, it would be easier for the United Nations' Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to confiscate arms inside Lebanon (in accordance to UN resolution 1701⁵ passed after the 2006 Israel – Hezbollah conflict). Importing the weapons via Syrian territory makes it easier for Hezbollah to escape the UN's attention.

4 <http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/64625>

5 <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8808.doc.htm>

If Assad falls, Hezbollah and Iran will be faced with a serious dilemma. In the event of a military strike by Israel against Iran's nuclear installations, how can Hezbollah retaliate when it knows that its missiles arsenal cannot be replenished? In the last Lebanon war of 2006, it has been reported that within the first day of the conflict Israel destroyed all of Hezbollah's long-range Zilzal missiles.⁶ Although this was a significant blow, Hezbollah knew that they could be replaced in the future, and so continued to fight for another 33 days.

But if the Assad regime falls, the replenishment of Hezbollah's weapons will become much more difficult, which in turn would seriously reduce Hezbollah's military stamina. This could seriously impede any plans which Iran has to use Hezbollah as a second strike capability in case of an Israeli attack. The reason being that any Israeli retaliation to a Hezbollah attack would not only damage its political standing in Lebanon, it could also leave it militarily weakened, significantly and possibly permanently.

In the knowledge that Hezbollah's supply lines were cut off, Israel could engage Hezbollah in a long, drawn out war, likely forcing Hezbollah to ask for a ceasefire soon after the start of a conflict, having exhausted its arsenal of missiles and heavy weap-

6 'Zilzal' or 'Zelzal' missile system was made available for sale by Iran in 1996. It had a length of 8.46 m and a diameter of 0.61 m, with a launch weight of 3,545 kg. It carried its 600 kg warhead to a maximum range of 200 km (124 miles).

ons. This would damage the organization's deterrence posture as well as its standing with its supporters. Meanwhile, its opponents in Lebanon would likely use such a development to their advantage by portraying the organization as adventurous, weak, or irresponsible. None of this would serve Iran's interests.

Syria as a Front Line

For years Iran has used its relations with the Assad regime as an asset in its various confrontations with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. If Assad falls, Iran would lose the support of Damascus in its struggle against U.S. and Saudi Arabia. This would have a number of serious repercussions.

First and foremost, this would be a boost for Saudi Arabia at Iran's expense. For years the Assad regime has helped Iran curtail Saudi influence in Lebanon, much to the Saudi government's fury.

Had it not been for Syria's help, its very unlikely that Iran could have established Hezbollah at all, as the movement was established via the Iranian embassy in Damascus. The Iranian responsible for what is, arguably, Iran's biggest foreign policy success to date is Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour. An ardent reformist, Mohtashamipour has come under intense attack at home since the 2009 post-election uprising in Iran. However, in the early 1980s, it was his relations with Syria officials

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and more importantly his impressive organizational skills that enabled him to put build Hezbollah in Lebanon out of the embassy in Damascus. It must be highlights that Hezbollah is an organization that is not only close to Iran, but also recognizes Iran's supreme leaders Khomeini and Khomeini as its *Marja-e Taghlid* (source of emulation). Without Syria's help, it is very unlikely that Mohtashamipour would have succeeded, as Lebanon was at that point extremely hostile towards Iran and its local Shiites.

Syria's help did not end there; for years it backed Iran's position against the Saudis in Lebanon, both politically and militarily as necessary. Notable in this context is the assassination of the pro-Saudi former prime minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri in February 2005.

It would have been almost impossible for Iranian-backed Hezbollah to assassinate Rafiq Hariri without Syrian support, which was at least tacit. At the time of Hariri's assassination, tens of thousands of Syrian soldiers were stationed in Lebanon.

Lebanon's security forces were in many cases run by, or certainly heav-

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ily monitored by, Syrian intelligence organizations, both regular and military. It would have been almost impossible for Hezbollah to plan such a sophisticated and complicated operation without the Syrians tacitly agreeing to turn a blind eye. This was a major factor, enabling Iran to remove a close friend and ally of Saudi Arabia, Rafiq Hariri.

Bashar Al Assad's regime also gave Iran political backing in Iraq against Saudi interests. Although Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki is reported to have had very close relations with the government of Ayatollah Khamenei, he also enjoyed good relations with the Assad regime. Al Maliki's relations with the Assad family date back to the two periods he lived in Damascus under the Assad regime: first between 1979 and 1982, following which he went to Tehran before returning to Damascus in 1990. He stayed there until the overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003. While there he served at a number of anti-Saddam publications and organizations, which came at a cost to Saudi Arabia's interests there. However, should Assad fall, Iran would lose Syria's backing in Iraq.

Assad also helped Iran to confront U.S. interests in the region. After the fall of Saddam Hussein Assad supported Iran's position in Iraq, providing backing for Jihadi rebels who crossed Syrian territory into Iraq, where they attacked U.S. forces. By doing this, Assad helped Tehran achieve its goal of extracting a high military and economic price from Washington. The ultimate goal of this strategy was through sustained assaults on U.S. forces to reduce the U.S. population's appetite for a possible military attack against Iran's nuclear installations.

In the event that the Assad government falls, the next Syrian government is much likelier to be pro-Saudi and quite possibly pro-American. It is also likelier to be anti-Iranian, due to Khamenei's steadfast support for Assad. In this scenario, Iran would lose a key ally in its efforts to confront Saudi and U.S. influence in the Middle East.

A Turkish Threat

The Iranian regime does not want to see a strong Turkey in the Middle East, and if Assad falls, this is exactly what could happen.

The split with Turkey over Syria has been terrible news for Ayatollah Khamenei's regime. Gone are the days when the two governments enjoyed good relations.

In fact, at one point, Turkey and Iran

were so close that on May 17 2010, Turkey, together with Brazil, put together a nuclear deal⁷ in order to transfer Iran's Low Enriched Uranium to Turkish soil, for eventual conversion to nuclear fuel. This deal was rejected because it contained a number of clauses that were unacceptable to the U.S. Nevertheless, the fact that the Iranians were willing to work with Turkey on such a sensitive issue spoke volumes about the high level of trust they had in Turkey's leadership.

Since then, relations between Ankara and Tehran have worsened considerably. Once a potential ally, Turkey has become one of Iran's strongest rivals in the region, mostly as a result of the events in Syria, though the Arab Spring as a whole has been damaging to their relations.

Since its inception in 1979, the post-revolution Iranian government has spent billions of dollars on broadcasting messages to the Arab masses in the Middle East claiming that its system of *Velayet-e Faqih* (rule of jurisprudence) is the most suitable model for them to follow. Not only is their model Islamic, declared Iran's leaders, but this system also allows for public participation in politics through elections. Moreover, an Islamic democracy working along these principles has the additional benefit of standing up to Israel and the West.

⁷ Iran signs nuclear fuel-swap deal with Turkey, BBC, 17 May 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8685846.stm>

This is one of the reasons the Iranian regime continues to spread its vehemently anti-Zionist and even anti-Semitic rhetoric. It does so because it believes that this is what the average Arab man or woman wants to hear, and that these messages will endear Iran to the region's Arabs, eventually inspiring them to overthrow their leaders, and replace them with an Iranian style system of governance.

To its credit, Iran has had a number of successes: in Lebanon with Hezbollah, in Palestine with Hamas, and also with some Shiite groups in post-Saddam Iraq. Iran's soft power as well as its economic and military and economic assistance program has over the years brought these groups closer to Tehran. However, Iran soon saw that Turkey, under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), was gaining political ground in the region.

First was the Mavi Marmara incident on May 31 2010, in which Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish activists during a botched raid of *MV Mavi Marmara*, a former Istanbul passenger ferry owned by the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation heading to Gaza. On that day, two governments lost. One was the Israeli government, which was subjected to a storm of international criticism as well as an internal inquiry because of its botched takeover of the ship and the deaths of civilians who attacked Israeli soldiers.

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The other loser was the Iranian government. Despite their having spent billions on Hamas, with a single act Turkey, stole Iran's place in the hearts and minds of many Gazans. With the Mavi Marmara incident, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan showed to the people of Gaza that he was ready to allow Turkish citizens to risk their lives in order to break the siege of Gaza. This act proved far more popular than Khamenei's financing of Hamas suicide bombings, which, although popular among some groups, brought misery for many Palestinians in the form of Israeli retaliation. The other factor at play here is that despite his calls to oppose Israel, Khamenei has never sent Iranians to confront Israel in order to defend Palestinians against Israel's policies. Instead he has relied on Palestinians and Lebanese to do the fighting. The fact that Erdogan demonstrated such unambiguous support to the victims and passengers of the Mavi Marmara showed that Turkey was willing to go a step further and risk the lives of its citizens. More importantly, the Mavi Marmara incident forced the Israeli government to ease the Gaza siege. This lies in direct contrast to the fall out of Iran's support for Hamas suicide bombings, which made the lives of many Palestinians more difficult, due to increased Israeli restrictions.

The incident was followed a year later by the Arab Spring. Despite having spent billions over the years on a propaganda campaign to win the hearts and minds of Arabs, much to Iran's amazement and disappointment, nobody wanted Iran's system of *Velayet-e Faqih*. What they wanted instead was the Turkish style of democracy, where Islamic parties can participate in politics in accordance to the wishes of the people - not the Iranian Islamic system, under which people are increasingly disenfranchised, and it is the government that decides who stays in office.

What made the Turkish system even more appealing is the fact that unlike Iran, Turkey is not internationally isolated, and its economy is booming.

Today, the overwhelming majority of the Arab world opposes Bashar Al Assad's regime in Syria, and its responsibility for the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent Syrians. To the Arab world, Iran is with Assad, and Turkey is against him. For now, this is bolstering Turkey's position and national image in the Arab world. Things will get far worst for Khamenei if Assad actually falls. In such a scenario - which is increasingly likely - Turkey will not only enjoy greater popularity in the Arab world, it will probably have very close military, diplomatic and economic relations with the new Syrian government. Unless Khamenei changes course

and switches sides soon, the reverse will happen with Iran's bilateral ties with post-Assad Syria.

In this case, a strong Turkey could also start to challenge Iran's influence in Iraq. What is even worse for Khamenei is Turkey's increasing popularity in Iran. Increasing number of Iranians are looking to their north-western neighbor with deep envy. Amir is one of many middle-class Iranians who strongly admire the Turkish model of governance and look at their neighbor's international standing with envy. "When I was in Turkey years ago they didn't even have color photography." said Amir, a resident of Tehran, to a PBS Tehran Bureau correspondent. "But look at how powerful they have become now. They are even part of NATO. But our country is faced with a stagnating economy that is becoming more and more isolated."⁸

In the event that Assad falls, and Turkey gains regional popularity, it is likely that increasing numbers of Iranians will want the same system for their own country, one which is democratic and has good relations with the West. To Khamenei, both concepts would pose an existential threat to his regime.

⁸ *Iranians Watch as Country's Economy Withers*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/07/dispatch-iranians-watch-as-country-s-economy-withers.html>