



Iran: The Syrian Highway in the Fight Against Israel Is Still Open

Michael Segall

- The wave of protest in Syria has put to the test the strategic alliance between Iran (and [Hizbullah](#)) and Bashar Assad's regime. Syria is the main state component of the "resistance camp" and serves as a logistical hinterland for Hizbullah, [Hamas](#), and Palestinian [Islamic Jihad](#). Iran sees its unequivocal backing for Syria as a demonstration of its ability to stay loyal to its allies despite the regional turmoil.
- Iran believes that ultimately the "Islamic mantle" will supplant the region's pro-Western regimes as part of the Islamic awakening. This would offset the possible loss of Syria and reconsolidate the resistance camp on a broad basis of Islamic religion and ideological hatred of Israel and the United States.
- Ali Akbar Velayati, Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei's adviser for international affairs, speaks of the resistance camp as incorporating "the new [Iraqi](#) government." If Bashar falls, Iran will make sure its western border with Iraq is also an advantageous border with the Middle East, enabling it to exploit instability in Syria so as to keep operating within and from its territory.
- The fall of the Assad regime would affect Iran's ability to help Hizbullah in "real time" in the event of another round of hostilities with Israel, and the freedom of action of the Hamas headquarters in Damascus. Yet, at the same time, opportunities will open for Iran in view of the electoral victories of the Islamic forces in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco.
- For as long as it lasts, the crisis in Syria will manifest the inter-Arab fault line of [Saudi Arabia](#) and the other Gulf states vs. Syria, and deepen the Persian-Arab, Sunni-Shiite, and historical Persian-Turkish (Ottoman) fault lines.

Iran Backs Its Syrian Ally

Since the wave of protest in Syria began as part of the Middle Eastern upheavals - with the Middle East being recast in the Islamic mold - the strategic alliance between Iran (and Hizbullah) and Bashar Assad's regime has been put to its ultimate test. Both the international community and the Arab-regional system (and [Turkey](#)) are trying to impose a change that entails Bashar's ouster and the fostering of a democratic political process in Syria, with Iran (and Hizbullah) standing alone in backing Syria. At the same time, China and Russia are counter-balancing Western and Arab efforts to oust Bashar, impeding a tough resolution in the UN Security Council.

Syria was a critical bulwark of the old Middle Eastern regional order that Iran had cultivated with immense financial, political, and military investments. It is the main state component of the "resistance camp" that Iran counterposes to the "imperialist" presence in the region, and was also a logistical hinterland for Hizbullah and to a lesser extent for the other nonstate terrorist members of the resistance camp - particularly the Palestinian terror organizations Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

The Arab Spring, or, as Iran calls it, the "Islamic awakening," found Iran almost at the height of the resistance camp's consolidation and power. Hizbullah had completed its takeover of the Lebanese arena, Hamas was entrenching its rule in [Gaza](#), and the peace process with regard to Israel, in its Syrian and Palestinian channels, had stopped. Iran, for its part, was continuing to progress in its nuclear program and to project regional power as the United States talked of completing its withdrawals from Iraq and

Afghanistan. Thus, Iran had successfully defied the United States and the West, which it saw as "at a nadir of military and economic weakness."

Now, as Bashar's regime faces an ongoing storm of protest and he refuses to give up his rule despite both internal and external pressures, his ally Iran is backing him with all its might. It is doing so despite and perhaps because of the regional conditions that are fostering a different Middle East. Seemingly, Iran will have to pay a price for defying the Arab Spring and sustaining its unstinting support for Bashar. Iran, however, sees its unequivocal backing for its ally Bashar - as contrasted to U.S. president Barack Obama's sudden abandonment of long-time U.S. ally Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak - as a manifestation of its power and its ability to withstand the revolution and stay loyal to its allies despite the regional turmoil.

Iran wants to proceed carefully, without betraying the basic elements of its policy and losing its main cards in the region so far - Syria, Hizbullah, and the Palestinian organizations. Tehran is well aware that Bashar Assad may eventually be toppled, but for now keeps giving him its full support including security and military,¹ economic, and diplomatic assistance² (including coordinating positions toward Russia and China). Iran believes that ultimately the "Islamic mantle" - as already evident from the Egyptian and Tunisian elections that saw the triumph of the Islamist movements, with which Iran maintained a dialogue during and despite the rule of the "dictators" - will supplant the region's pro-Western regimes as part of the Islamic awakening. As Iran sees it, this Islamic ambience, which is fundamentally hostile toward Israel and the United States, would offset the possible loss of Syria and reconsolidate the resistance camp on a broad basis of Islamic religion and ideological hatred of Israel and the United States.

For now, Iran prefers to hold the rope at both ends: to keep supporting the Syrian regime and helping it to survive - including through Hizbullah - to repress the protest, and to portray the United States, Israel, and the moderate Arab states and bodies - those whose leaders still stand, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, and the Arab League - as lurking behind the efforts to overthrow Bashar for having led the Middle East's anti-Israeli, anti-Western resistance camp for years. Iran is pursuing this course even though it knows that, if Bashar falls, it stands to pay a heavy political and military price in terms of its future relations with the new regime and its ability to assist Hizbullah via the Syrian-Turkish conduit. The commander of the Qods Force of the Revolutionary Guards said recently in this regard that "the war in Syria is not a sickness that will destroy the regime," since most of its citizens continue to support Bashar.³

Indeed, Iran's loyalty to Syria has already cost it dearly in the form of rising tensions with Islamist Turkey. Here, too, Iran has criticized Turkey for siding with the West instead of Syria, and as relations have worsened, some in Iran have even characterized Islam in Turkey as "Western Islam" - an appellation formerly reserved in Iran for the moderate Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia.

Syria: "The Gold-Plated Link in the Chain of Anti-Israeli Resistance"

Iran's present position regarding the "plots" unfolding in Syria, along with Syria's role in Iran's overall regional policy, was formulated quite precisely by Ali Akbar Velayati. He is Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei's special assistant for international affairs, currently coordinating for him the strategy toward the Islamic awakening in his role as secretary-general of the World Assembly of the Islamic Awakening. Velayati praised Syria's staunch resilience "in the face of the plots and collusions of different states aimed at weakening Syria's firm stance as the main arm of the resistance front against the Zionist regime." Velayati also linked together all the members of this camp when he said that "the chain of resistance against Israel, whose main links are Iran and Syria, Hizbullah, *the new government in Iraq*, and Hamas runs along the Syrian highway." He also referred to Syria as "the gold-plated link in this chain."⁴



Ali Akbar Velayati, Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei's adviser for international affairs and secretary-general of the World Assembly of the Islamic Awakening, addresses the group's first conference in Tehran on Dec. 13, 2011.

On another occasion, perhaps manifesting wishful thinking, Velayati insisted that the Syrian uprising had passed its worst and the Assad government would not collapse thanks to the government's "strong roots" in Syrian society.

He added that Burhan Ghalioun, head of the opposition Syrian National Council, had no social base in Syria and accused him of being an "agent" of the West and Israel.⁵

Iran's ambassador to [Lebanon](#), Qazanfar Roknabadi, averred that "Fortunately, Syria is strongly moving towards stability and a full failure of the enemies' plots grows more and more obvious each day."⁶ Several times Iran has denied reports that it has held contacts with opposition elements.⁷

Velayati's assertions echo repeated claims by various spokesmen and commentators that the "Syrian case" is different and not part of the Arab Spring. They also charge that the United States, Israel, some of the Arab states, the West, and Turkey (!) seek to exploit the atmosphere of the Arab Spring so as to be rid of Bashar's regime, which they see as a thorn in their side given his strong posture - which they liken to Iran's - against the West and his role as a key member of the resistance front against Israel and its efforts to gain legitimacy.

Is Syria a Red Line for Iran?

Mohsen Rezaee, secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council and former IRGC (Revolutionary Guards) commander, said in an interview to Hizbullah's *Al-Manar* network that Syria, Hizbullah, and Hamas constitute a red line for Iran, which "will not allow any problem to be created for them since they form the Islamic world's front line [of defense] against Israel."⁸

The conservative newspaper *Kayhan*, which reflects Khamenei's positions, claimed the United States fears that the resistance camp will only gain power once the Syrian crisis ends and hence is working to topple the Syrian regime. The writer of the article opines that what is happening in Syria has no connection at all to the Arab Spring, which only provides a pretext for overthrowing Bashar and weakening the resistance camp. In his view, U.S. activity in Syria is aimed at offsetting the great damage that the Islamic awakening has inflicted on U.S. policy in the region, including the loss of its power base and popularity.⁹ Former Iranian ambassador to Syria Ahmad Mousavi said similarly that the West's hostility toward Syria stems from Syria's ongoing support for the resistance against Western peace plans aimed at bestowing legitimacy on Israel. Mousavi added that President Assad is the only Arab leader who has not been charged with either moral or economic corruption. He also expressed support for Bashar's reforms in Syria.¹⁰

The hard-line newspaper *Jomhouri Eslami*, too, denies any Arab Spring context for the events in Syria and depicts them as an attempt by the West, led by the United States, to uproot a main pillar of the

resistance camp. The paper describes the failure of the American attempt to influence the revolutions in the region, points to the rise of the Islamist regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, and asserts that Iran and Hizbullah's close ties with the Assad government are an important factor in its stability and have neutralized the plot by the king of Jordan and the Turkish government to topple him.

It is totally clear that the aim of the United States and its allies in ousting Assad's regime is to destroy the resistance front against the Zionist regime. Neutralizing this plot requires strengthening the Syrian regime. This can be done through two channels: external support from Syria's friends who share a common denominator in the struggle against Zionism and the United States, and internal reforms that the Syrian regime itself must carry out, and without which there will be no benefit from the external support....Even though the Syrian regime has overcome the plots, it needs to take some sort of measures to achieve full stability and not provide a pretext to the opponents. In truth, the rulers of Syria, more than in the past, must go in the direction of reforms....Reform must start with the Baath Party, continue with the uprooting of administrative corruption, and move on to solving the problems of the public's welfare and ensuring freedom.¹¹

Ali Larijani, chairman of the Majlis, called on all the Islamic countries not to exploit the crisis in Syria and play into the hands of countries outside the region, or cooperate with their plot against Syria. "We expect Islamic countries not to allow those who hold a grudge against Syria for its resistance against the Zionist regime to take advantage of the situation."¹² Majlis member Mohammad Karim Abadi said that Iran "strongly condemn[s] the plots against the Syrian nation that is on the frontline of resistance (against Zionists)....We ask Muslim nations in the region, especially Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to support the people of Syria who were in the forefront of Zionists' aggression and their lands are still under the occupation of aliens."¹³ The editor of *Kayhan*, Hossein Shariatmadari, also criticized Qatar, calling it "the undeclared, and sometimes declared, base for the United States in the region. Qatar's open ties with the Zionist regime and its open participation in the plots of Saudi Arabia and Turkey to exert pressure on Syria and remove it from the resistance axis, are only some examples of the treachery of the mercenary Qatar government."¹⁴

Iran also exploited the recent suicide bombings in Damascus to slam the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia and claim they were responsible. After one of the bombings, a spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry said "the nation and the government in Syria will succeed to foil the Zionist-American axis that seeks to ignite civil war and separatism in the region."¹⁵ The director of the board of the state-run Iranian satellite channel *Al-Alam* (which targets an Arabic-speaking audience) claimed that "the attack points to the terrorist nature of the armed group and to the activity of a few groups that work hand in hand with their allies." He hinted that the attack was carried out after the intelligence agencies of Turkey, France, the United States, and several Arab states held parleys on sowing chaos and instability in Syria.¹⁶ The semi-official *Fars* news agency was more blunt. It claimed in a recent news dispatch from Syria that al-Qaeda and Salafi terrorists have infiltrated into Syria in recent months and were involved in terrorist attacks, the latest of which was a suicide attack that killed 25 people. The report maintained that, in addition to the support provided by Saudi Arabia for the terrorist attacks in Syria, Saudi clergymen and Friday prayers leaders in the kingdom have also called the protests and moves against the Syrian government as *halal* (religiously legitimate) and have persuaded people to conduct them.¹⁷

Iran and Turkey in Conflict: "Real Islam" vs. "Secular Islam"

Iran's firm support for Syria, almost unquestioned within Iran, together with its opposition to Turkey's strong stance against the violent repression in Syria, has quickly put the two states at loggerheads. And this comes shortly after a "golden age" of improving relations within the Syrian-Turkish-Iranian triangle, which had emerged briefly as a new regional axis before the Syrian crisis erupted. This tension between the two non-Arab states, each of which for its own reasons not only seeks to mold the new regional order but to stand at its helm, has brought their intense rivalry and political-religious divergence to the fore.

When it came to fine-tuning Iran's policy toward Turkey, it was Velayati who detailed the extremely delicate Islamic issues between the two states. He criticized Turkey's governmental system as "secular

Islam," a mere variant of Western liberal democracy, and an inappropriate model for countries now experiencing the Islamic awakening.¹⁸

Hassan Rowhani, one of Khamenei's two representatives on the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and head of the Strategic Research Center of the Expediency Council, similarly claimed that, while the West wanted Turkey - not Iran - to be a model for the popular revolutions in the region, Turkey maintained close ties with Israel and its anti-Israeli policy was merely symbolic. Rowhani also asserted that the Second Lebanon War and Israel's 2009 Gaza operation had provided the main impetus for the Islamic trend in the region; and that by supporting the Syrian opposition, "Turkey has crossed the boundaries that are permitted it."¹⁹

Also joining the criticism were senior officials in the Iranian religious establishment. For example, Grand Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi advised Turkey not to stoke the Syrian crisis. He claimed the unrest there "is a conspiracy devised by the United States, Israel, and one of the Arab countries, and Turkey is feeding the flames of the crisis....Turkish officials took an anti-Zionist line for a while to gain popularity, but this popularity will turn into disrepute. Why do they not understand?"²⁰

Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, called on Turkey to modify its policy toward Syria and recognize reality if it wants to pursue a policy congruent with Iran's. The policy Turkey has adopted, he asserted, does not contribute to regional stability.²¹ Former Iranian foreign minister Manuchehr Mottaki, who was deposed a few months ago by President [Ahmadinejad](#), also criticized Turkey's position toward the Syrian crisis and called for a reconsideration. He also urged Syria to focus on reforms and denied any possibility of Iran intervening there.²²

The escalating tension between Iran and Turkey not only concerns the Syrian situation. It also stems from Ankara's decision to station components of NATO's antimissile defense system on its soil. The vice-chairman of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee did not rule out the possibility that Iran, if attacked, would strike targets in Turkish territory, while IRGC aerospace commander Brig.-Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh stated:

We have prepared ourselves. If any threat is staged against Iran, we will target NATO's missile shield in Turkey and will then attack other targets....We are sure that the missile system is deployed by the U.S. for the sake of the Zionist regime, but to deceive the world's people, especially the Turkish people, they allege that the system belongs to NATO....Turkey is a member and cover for NATO. Today NATO has become a cover for the U.S. [moves] while the U.S. itself has turned into a cover for the Zionist regime....Yet the Turkish people are aware and we are sure that Turkey's Muslims will stop this plot by themselves....We are sure that the Muslim people of Turkey will promptly cut these systems into pieces under threatening conditions.²³

Turkey, for its part, has not remained docile. With tensions between the two countries mounting, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu during a recent visit to Tehran criticized Iran and urged his counterpart, Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi, to give the Syrian regime "good advice" on its responsibility for the bloodshed in Syria and the need to put a stop to it.²⁴

Whereas the Iranian Foreign Ministry is trying to calm the winds with Turkey and prevent further escalation, Khamenei's bureau and elements connected to it are in fact pushing for a more aggressive policy toward Ankara. Salehi, for his part, trying to tamp down the tensions, said the two states had a good relationship and called on the Turkish media - which gave much play to Iranian statements that did not rule out an Iranian attack on Turkish soil - to distinguish between official spokesmen and those speaking only for themselves. He also said that policy decisions, at any rate, are taken by the supreme leader, the president, and the foreign minister.²⁵ It appears, however, that in the Turkish case in particular, and regarding the overall Iranian policy toward the regional changes in general with an emphasis on the Islamic awakening, the Iranian Foreign Ministry is not playing a significant role in leading the aggressive and defiant Iranian policy.

Saadollah Zarei is an international-affairs expert who also writes editorials for *Kayhan*. In an article in the conservative newspaper *Siyasat-e Ruz* on the crisis in Syria, he divided the Middle Eastern states into

two blocs - the "resistance front" and the "conciliation front" - and suggested the cost-benefit tally for each of these:

The countries of the resistance front were always subject to criticism by the West as well as harsh criticism from the Arab states in the region. Now, when the international system has joined ranks to bring down Bashar Assad's regime and is also threatening war against Iran, the Arab states that are members of the Arab League have convened and decided to suspend Syria's membership²⁶ [a decision that Iran criticized] and also to impose sanctions on it [in an attempt to promote the designs of the West]. The events of recent years [the victories of Iran's allies Hizbullah and Hamas in the anti-Israeli struggle], Iran's progress in the nuclear field, the U.S. forces' withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic situation in the United States, and the power struggles surrounding the presidential elections there are stymieing U.S. efforts to control and manage the region, and given these conditions of an administrative vacuum along with the turmoil in the Arab countries, Iran is the big winner. In parallel, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states are trying to thwart these developments [the strengthening of Iran and its allies] by isolating Syria, a strategic ally of Iran in the region and the bridge to Hizbullah and Hamas. Another actor that is trying to isolate Syria, with the aim of preventing Iran from taking the reins, is Turkey. Turkey knows that presently there is not a single Arab state in the region that can prevent it from becoming a superpower, which only Iran can do, and therefore it has joined the Arab states in trying to prevent the deepening of Iran's penetration.

Zarei also asserts that Iran unquestionably and assertively backs Syria against the Western and Arab states.²⁷

Where to Go from Here?: A New Approach for the Resistance Camp

All in all, the crisis in Syria poses one of Iran's most difficult challenges in recent years in the field of foreign policy and exporting the revolution. It is occurring at a time when international pressure on Iran is mounting and sanctions on its oil exports and central bank (CBI) appear more imminent than ever. Yet, even under the growing burden of sanctions, Iran is not abandoning its longtime ally and in recent weeks has been unequivocally supporting Syria and providing Bashar with military and security assistance to curb the protests.

Even though Iran, when referring to the crisis in Syria, often stresses the firm stance of the resistance camp and the price Syria is paying for being a main pillar of it, Iran is already preparing for the possibility - despite almost never publicly admitting it - that Bashar will eventually fall. Especially important here is the statement by Khamenei's international-affairs adviser on incorporating the "new Iraqi government" in the resistance camp along with the growing contacts between Iran and that government, which began as soon as the United States had completed its withdrawal - a move whose strange timing plays into Iran's hands. If Bashar falls, then, Iran will make sure its western border with Iraq is also an advantageous border with the Middle East, enabling it to exploit instability in Syria so as to keep operating within and from its territory. In recent months Iran has - similar to its activity in Lebanon - been investing substantial resources in Iraq. This goes beyond the subversion it waged there throughout the U.S. presence and the assistance it provided, sometimes in coordination with and through Lebanese Hizbullah, to the radical Shiite elements there.

Furthermore, the possible loss of Syria will push Iran to deal more forcefully with its "backyard" - the Persian Gulf - and to settle accounts with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain; Iran has not yet said its last word about the Shiite revolt in Bahrain and the Shiites' struggle in eastern Saudi Arabia. Iran's recent show of strength in the gulf in the form of a wide-scale naval and army exercise, to be complemented by a Revolutionary Guards exercise to be held in the coming weeks, along with escalatory rhetoric about possibly closing off the Strait of Hormuz in case of sanctions on Iran's oil exports and central bank, indicates that Iran aims to tighten its grip and further entrench its status in the region.

An Abundance of Fault Lines

For as long as it lasts the crisis in Syria will manifest the inter-Arab fault line of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states vs. Syria, and deepen the Persian-Arab, Sunni-Shiite, and historical Persian-Turkish (Ottoman) fault lines. Parallel to the metahistorical processes is the ongoing weakening of the United States in the Middle East and the rise of Islamic regimes that, albeit mostly Sunni, are much closer to Iran than to America. From Tehran's standpoint, the real challenge is Turkey, as illustrated by the crisis with Syria. Turkey sees what is happening in Syria - its backyard - as part of the Arab Spring and calls on the president to respond to the will of the people, while Iran keeps backing Bashar and claims the Arab Spring is just a pretext to get rid of him. Both of these states have a superpower-imperialist past they would like to bring back, and will continue their dispute as the Middle Eastern tumult intensifies and even when the dust of the "Arab revolutions" settles. Both, with their apparent Islamic agenda, are competing for the same public, but still a wide gap yawns between them.

Iran appears to be at an advanced stage of reshaping what it calls the resistance camp. The fall of one of its mainstays, the Assad regime, would affect Iran's ability to help Hizbullah in "real time" in the event of another round of hostilities with Israel, and the freedom of action of the Hamas headquarters in Damascus. Yet, at the same time, opportunities will open for Iran in the region. In its view, the electoral victories of the Islamic forces (even if Sunni) and the possibility of communicating with them without fear of governmental repression - particularly in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, while in eastern Saudi Arabia the Shiite minority is still under tight control - opens for Tehran a new range of ideology-driven opportunities. As in the past, the common denominator around which it seeks to unite all members of the camp is hatred of the West and Israel. Here, Iran's rhetoric about the Syrian crisis, which it portrays as an attempt to harm a central Arab actor that has operated against Israel and has paid and is paying a price for its actions, plays a salient role.

Iran will try to consolidate the resistance camp in accordance with the changing geostrategic conditions of the region. In the first stage, it will work to widen the camp's ideological reach to include both a religious basis of Islam and an ideological-political basis of hatred of Israel and the United States. As for the practical aspects of the struggle against Israel, Iran will continue to leave them in the hands of Hizbullah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, attempting to broaden the scope of military-terrorist conflict with Israel in the future. Meanwhile, Iran is assigning an important role to its nuclear program and to formulating an appropriate deterrence concept that will be combined with its current "resistance camp" doctrine.

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Notes

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IDF Lt.-Col. (ret.) Michael (Mickey) Segall, an expert on strategic issues with a focus on Iran, terrorism, and the Middle East, is a senior analyst at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.