

Syria's Bashar Assad sticks with his friends in the region

BEHIND THE LINES: Syrian dictator's visit to Tehran reflects core strategic preferences.

By Jonathan Spyer / May 13, 2022

Syrian President Bashar Assad's visit to Tehran earlier this week showcased the centrality of his regime's relationship with its Iranian patrons.

The rhetoric that emerged from the dictator's meetings with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi was familiar to the point of tedium. Khamenei's website declared that Assad's "victory in an international war" had "increased the respect and credibility of Syria." Assad spoke of the "spirit of resistance" and the "strategic ties" that have, in his view, prevented Israeli dominance over the region.

[...]

In Israel, officials have spoken of a supposed rift opening up between Damascus and Tehran. Former IDF Military Intelligence head Maj.-Gen. **Tamir Heyman**, quoted by researcher **Udi Dekel** in a recent article at the Institute for National Security Studies, assessed that Israel has "driven a wedge between Assad and the Iranians," through its ongoing military campaign.

In this telling, Israel's "campaign between the wars" and the Gulf states' rehabilitation efforts play a complementary role, in a type of good cop-bad cop dynamic. Israel's actions demonstrate the cost to Assad of sticking with the Iranians.

The Arab inducements, meanwhile, show the opportunities inherent in a return to the fold. Arab diplomacy has departed from unity with the West in this regard. The US and the EU continue to follow a strategy of pressure and isolation of Assad.

Yet despite Israeli pressure and Arab inducement, Assad appears to continue to cleave to his alliance with Iran. The wedge perceived by Heyman has yet to produce substantive results.

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