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The Axis of Evil in Action: Iranian Support for Syria

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There is no doubt that Iran is quite concerned about events in Syria and the possibility that the Assad regime will be toppled. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has not had any real ally, among the superpowers or in the region, other than Syria. The alliance between Iran and Syria has lasted more than thirty years, the longest alliance between any two states in the region in the last few decades. Syria is a key component in Iran's security doctrine, as it is a principal arena in the struggle against Israel, the United States, and the West in general. Moreover, Syria is an important link connecting Iran to Lebanon, viewed by Iran as a significant arena thanks to Hizbollah's successful evolution as a prominent Shiite-Islamist organization integrally tied to Tehran, and in turn, the construction of a Hizbollah-led Lebanon that can function as an Iranian front against Israel.

These important achievements are liable to be seriously undermined should Assad's regime collapse. This is of course not an inevitable outcome to the current turmoil; perhaps the damage to Iran will be limited or Assad's regime will survive despite its current difficulties. In another scenario, the current regime could survive but without Assad and his cronies who would be exiled after some sort of compromise with the opposition. It may also be that Syria will be overcome by chaos, a situation Iran could exploit to expand its influence by sending arms and cash to various factions as it did in Iraq. However, these scenarios are no consolation to Iran; it views its assets in Syria and Lebanon as at risk, and should these disappear, its regional standing will be negatively affected. The Iranians are presumably concerned on yet another score: the Iranian opposition, in a state of suspended animation for the last three years, could be inspired by the collapse of Assad's regime and encouraged to renew its activity against the Islamic regime in Iran.

The worst possible scenario from Iran's point of view would be for the next Syrian regime to distance itself from Tehran, forge closer relations with the United States and the West, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and distance itself from Hizbollah. Indeed, Iran views the Western pressure on the Assad regime as part of the effort designed to

topple the regime in Tehran and change the regional balance of power to Iran's detriment. In recent years Iran has worked to establish a radical Shiite axis extending from western Afghanistan, through Iran, to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, with a proxy in the Gaza Strip. In Iran's view, what is at stake is thus not only the future of its main ally but also the possibility of the toppling of the central and irreplaceable link in the axis it has tried to build.

Therefore, Iran is making every effort to bolster Assad. Western governments have accused Iran of sending weapons to Syria, thereby violating the arms embargo. Iran has sent several hundred members of the Revolutionary Guards al-Quds force to Syria – including some 150 officers, according to some reports – and apparently also members of Hizbollah. Recently, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards was forced to admit publicly that he dispatched some of his senior officers to consult on “non-military matters,” after some were caught by Syrian opposition forces. They are helping the Syrian regime with training, exercises, consulting, and planning, on the basis of Iran's experience – successful from its perspective – in suppressing the Iranian opposition in 2009. Iran has also moved equipment to Syria designed to disrupt communications, the internet, email, and cell phone communications. There is no evidence that Revolutionary Guards are involved in the actual fighting and it is unlikely they would be involved in this way to any serious extent, both because a few hundred additional fighters for Assad will not change the outcome and because Iran is not interested in being portrayed as involved in killing civilians in a foreign nation. However, senior American administration representatives have claimed that Iran is assisting Syria in building an armed militia called The People's Army, made up mostly of Shiites but with an Alawite minority, whose job is to support the Assad regime.

Iran is also providing Syria with much financial support – about \$1 billion according to one report – to cope with its economic woes. The Iranians are helping Syria bypass the economic sanctions imposed on it, using the vast experience it has accrued in this particular niche: they are helping Syria export oil, which Syria is banned from doing, and have opened a corridor through Iraq to transfer goods from Syria to Iran, thus bypassing Turkey. Iran is also trying to help Assad politically vis-à-vis various elements – such as Russia and Turkey – in order to devise a political arrangement that would end the crisis without regime change and avert the possibility of Western military intervention in Syria.

Internationally, Iran is paying a price for supporting the Assad regime, and is viewed as linked to a regime that butchers its own people. It has damaged its recently improved relations with Turkey, which has explicitly come out against Syria. Most importantly, it is undercutting any future relations with the Syrian opposition should the latter seize the reins of government. Perhaps for this reason, according to one unconfirmed report, Iran has begun to withdraw its Revolutionary Guards contingent from Syria. In any case,

however, Iran apparently assumes that this is a valid risk, especially should the Assad regime survive. Indeed, at the conference of the Non-Allied Movement in August in Tehran, the UN secretary-general made a point of stressing Iran's important role in the Syrian crisis.

Nonetheless, Iran's ability to help the Assad regime is limited and the Syrian regime's survival doesn't depend on Tehran. Rather, the fate of the regime will be settled primarily on the basis of its capabilities and resolve compared with the capabilities and resolve of the opposition, and perhaps by potential Western military intervention. If the Assad regime manages to survive, it will not be because of help from Iran.

Does Iran have alternatives to its relationship with the Assad regime? In theory, Iran could try to establish ties with Syrian opposition elements, as an investment for the future should the Assad regime fall. Indeed, there are already reports that Iran has been in contact with some Syrian opposition groups identified with Iran in an attempt to resolve the crisis but also in an effort to build a bridge to a future Syrian regime. However, it is doubtful that this option will do Iran much good, because it will be hard pressed to straddle the fence: as long as Iran's main tendency is to help Assad's regime survive, it cannot promote ties with the opposition in any real sense. It is also hard to imagine that Syrian opposition elements would be prepared to ally themselves with Iran as long as it is sending military assistance to help the Assad regime put down the opposition by force and are eager to earn assistance from the West.

At the same time, Iran is working to expand its influence in other Arab countries. It has already become the most important external player in Iraq, especially since the American withdrawal in late 2011. Furthermore, Iran is trying to exploit the changes in Egypt in order to rebuild relations with it. While these attempts are not directly linked to concerns about the fall of the Assad regime, and building the Iraqi stronghold started long before the crisis in Syria erupted, one may assume that the Iranians are currently also operating out of the necessity to construct an alternative in the Arab world – even if only partial – should it lose its foothold in Syria.

