

# The Strategic Alliance Between Iran and Syria – Military and Economic Aspects

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The cooperation between Iran and Syria has recently broadened in a variety of areas, including the military, security, economic and scientific spheres.

Close relations between the two countries are evident, inter alia, in numerous reciprocal visits by their leaders and in statements made during these visits. Thus, for example, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declared, during Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's February 2007 visit to Tehran, that Iran and Syria constitute a strategic depth for one another. [1] Strategic cooperation between the two countries was also expressed in statements by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at a meeting with Syrian Prime Minister Muhammad Naji Al-Utri during his March 2007 visit to the country, when he said, "Iran and Syria have common enemies, [a circumstance] which requires perfect coordination vis-à-vis enemy plans, attainable through a maximal deepening of relations between them." [2]

Assad, on his part, declared in Tehran in February 2007 that "enhancing relations between Tehran and Damascus is extremely important for solving the problems of the Islamic world, as well as for the progress of both Iran and Syria." [3] Furthermore, in February 11, 2007 meeting marking the 28th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, held at the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, Al-Utri stressed that "strategic Syria-Iran cooperation and coordination are the only way to deal with the pressures and with the evil attack on them [by the West]." [4]

This paper will examine military and economic aspects of the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran, based on statements by senior officials of these countries, on protocols and memoranda of understanding, and on communiqués and articles published in the Arab and Iranian media.

## Development of the Military Alliance Between Iran and Syria

In addition to reciprocal visits by the leaders of Iran and Syria, there have recently been several visits by military delegations to both countries, in which agreements were reached for developing military relations and a protocol for defense cooperation was signed.

On July 19, 2007, Ahmadinejad paid a one-day visit to Syria. According to non-official sources, he was joined by a high-ranking military delegation headed by Iranian Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar comprising over 20 officers from the General Staff and the Revolutionary Guards. The delegation arrived on the presidential plane, which landed in a remote corner of the Damascus airport. [5] During the visit, Ahmadinejad and Assad signed a statement reiterating the strategic alliance between Iran and Syria. In a joint press conference held by the two presidents, Ahmadinejad declared that "Iran and Syria have been, are, and always will be sisters and allies." He added that "the two countries present a powerful united front against the enemy in the region [i.e. the West and Israel]." [6]

## Al-Sharq Al-Awsat: Iran Will Finance Syria's Weapons Deals

On July 21, 2007, correspondent for the London daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Ali Nourizadeh wrote, citing an Iranian source that had monitored the Damascus talks, that during Ahmadinejad's visit a secret agreement had been signed on comprehensive strategic cooperation between the two countries. The agreement included the following articles: [7]

1. Iran will finance Syria's purchase of weapons from Russia, Belarus, and North Korea, and will allocate \$1 billion to the acquisition of 400 state-of-the-art Russian T-72 tanks, 18 Mig-31 jets, eight Sukhoi-24 bombers, and a number of Mig-8 helicopters.
2. In Syria, an industrial concern will be established by the Iranian aircraft and space industry for the production of medium-range missiles.
3. Factories for the production of missile launches for Nur, Arash, and Nazeat missiles will be established.
4. The Syrian army will receive Al-Barqa armored vehicles and Zolfaqar tanks produced in Iran.
5. The Syrian navy will receive C801 and C802 missiles manufactured in Iran, which are identical to Chinese surface-to-surface missiles.
6. Syrian navy and air force officers will be trained in Iran.
7. Syria will receive technological aid relating to nuclear research and chemical weapons.

According to the paper, Ahmadinejad "undertook a commitment to support the Syrian position [vis-à-vis the political crisis] in Lebanon, to try to prevent the assembly of the Lebanese parliament [slated for September 25, 2007] designed to elect

a new president, and to continue attempts to overthrow the [present] Lebanese government. In return, Damascus is expected to pledge not to enter into a peace process with Israel. [8] Ahmadinejad further stressed that his government would not conduct negotiations on the future of Lebanon without Syria's consent and blessing. As for Iraq, Syria expressed greater willingness to maintain relations with the Al-Maliki government. At the same time, the two countries resolved to broaden their resistance to the U.S. and its partners in Iraq, in order to force it to withdraw." [9]

Rebuttals to the Al-Sharq Al-Awsat report appeared in the Iranian press. For example, a July 22, 2007 editorial by the daily Kayhan, which is affiliated with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, stated that "Al-Sharq Al-Awsat is one of the principal defenders of U.S. policy in the Middle East." [10] Senior advisor to Ahmadinejad, Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi, likewise dismissed the report, saying that "the lives of Zionists will not be lengthened by the false information that they are disseminating." [11]

About one month before the 2006 Lebanon-Israel war, on June 16, 2006, Nourizadeh published, also in Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, an item on a military cooperation agreement between Iran and Syria, thus tightening military ties between the two. The agreement was signed at the end of a visit to Tehran by a delegation of Syrian military and intelligence officers, headed by Syrian Defense Minister Hassan Turkmani, which met with Iranian Defense Minister Najjar and senior Iranian security officials. The agreement stipulated that Iran would fund Syria's purchase of military equipment from Russia, China, and Ukraine, and would train Syrian navy personnel. Syria, in turn, would continue to permit the flow of Iranian military aid to Hizbullah in Lebanon to pass through its territory. Nourizadeh also reported that the two ministers had decided to establish an open channel between Syria and Iran for consultation and contacts on military and security issues. Nourazideh went on to state that, in a press conference following the signing of the agreement, Turkmani announced that Iran and Syria "presented a unified front against Israel's threats," stressing that "Iran viewed Syrian security as a [safeguard for] its own security." [12]

In December 2006, Nourizadeh reported on the establishment, in Damascus, of an Iranian Revolutionary Guards base. [13]

#### Iran Places Its Defense Resources at Syria's Disposal

On a March 10, 2007 Damascus visit, a high-ranking Iranian security delegation headed by Najjar met with Assad, Turkmani, and Syrian Chief of Staff Ali Habib, and toured Syrian military and industrial facilities. During the visit, Najjar and Turkmani signed a protocol on defense cooperation, [14] which included "developing and strengthening defense and security ties, safeguarding regional security [by the countries of the region], and [ensuring] uninterrupted consultation in order to uphold the interests of the two countries." [15]

During the visit, Najjar declared that Iran was placing all its defense capabilities at Syria's disposal, and added that the discussions between the two sides during this visit had focused on weapons manufacturing cooperation and on strengthening Syria's defense capabilities. Turkmani, on his part, stated that the discussions had concerned "an exchange of technological know-how for weapons manufacturing and for conducting the necessary training, along with [other] military, defense, and political issues." He reiterated statements by his Iranian counterpart that "Iran's defense resources are at Syria's disposal." Turkmani added, "Relations between the two countries are strategic, and hence their actions are aimed at developing cooperation between the two armies and at strengthening their defense capability, so as to face the conspiracies of the enemies which are targeting the region in general, and Iran and Syria in particular." [16]

In early June 2007, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki remarked during a visit to Damascus that in the event of a military attack on Syria by the U.S. or Israel, "Iran will stand by Syria's side with all its options and capabilities." [17]

In April 2007, a high-ranking Syrian military delegation headed by Yahya Suleiman, director of Iran's National Defense Institute, paid a one-week visit to Iran. In a meeting with Iranian Deputy Chief of Staff Hassani Sadi, Suleiman stressed the need to expand Iranian-Syrian military cooperation. In addition, the Syrian delegation held discussions with Iranian Revolutionary Guards Commander Yahya Rahim Safavi and Iranian Defense Minister Najjar. The delegation visited military bases, and observed the Iranian Defense Ministry's military capabilities. [18]

#### Strengthening of Economic and Scientific Cooperation

Along with security cooperation, Iran and Syria are working to promote economic relations. The importance that both leaders attribute to the economic issue was evident in declarations by Ahmadinejad prior to his July 2007 visit to Damascus. [19] In a March 2007 meeting with Syrian Prime Minister Al-Utri, Ahmadinejad stated, "Iran supports expanding cooperation with Syria... in all aspects, including industry, agriculture, science, technology, medicine, and energy." [20] During this visit, Ahmadinejad's associate and senior advisor Parviz Daoudi signed a cooperation agreement with Al-Utri, containing 12 articles on issues such as electricity, agriculture, espionage technology, construction, housing, and sewerage. Daoudi stated, "Iran's intentions were to establish a suitable framework for conducting [joint] oil and gas activity... [and] Iran possesses innovative and significant technologies, including nuclear

technology for peaceful purposes... which it is inclined to transfer to its friend and sister Syria..." [21]

It should be mentioned that as early as February 2006, during the eighth session of the Higher Iranian-Syrian Joint Committee in Damascus, the two countries signed numerous memoranda of understanding and cooperation in various areas, including economy, industry and commerce, science and culture, agriculture, health, tourism, gas, oil and energy, communication, and transport. [22] During 2006, Iran-Syria trade and exchange reached \$200 million, as opposed to \$115 million in 2005. There is currently an increase in Iranian projects and investments in Syria, and their scope is expected to reach \$3 billion by 2010. [23]

Along with economic cooperation, Iran and Syria are promoting relations in the scientific field. During a July 2007 visit to Syria, Iranian Science, Research and Technology Minister Mohammad Mehdi Zahedi met with Al-Utri, and the two discussed ways of promoting research cooperation and of expanding science and technology relations. [24] Zahedi also met with the Damascus University president Professor Wael Mu'ala and expressed Iran's willingness to aid the university in all areas of science and technology. [25] Also during his visit, Zahedi announced the establishment of an Iranian university in Syria, which would be an international branch of the Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran; the branch will employ Iranian and Syrian lecturers and academics. [26]

#### Articles in the Syrian Press on the Alliance with Iran

Following are excerpts from articles in the Syrian press that stressed the strategic importance of the Syria-Iran alliance.

#### Syrian Columnist: An Alliance Between Syria and Iran is a Strategic Imperative

In an op-ed posted July 22, 2007, Iyad Al-Ja'fri, columnist for the Syria News website which is associated with the Syrian government, stated that dismantling the Iran-Syria alliance would cause both sides to lose their winning cards, i.e. Hizbullah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. Al-Ja'fri wrote: "From time to time, the Lebanese and Arab press that is identified with the counter-axis, i.e. the so called 'moderate' axis, publishes analyses [of Iran-Syria relations]. The theoreticians [of this axis] often present signs of a schism between Iran and Syria, sometimes bolstering their claims with facts that point to a slackening in the relations between these two allies... On the other hand, the experts of the Baker[-Hamilton] committee understand that the Damascus-Tehran alliance is strategic, and not tactical, as some claim. This alliance is strategic not because Damascus and Tehran - or one of them - want it to be so, but rather because the two countries are compelled to make it so.

"[A question arises] as to reasons that compel Iran and Syria to maintain a strategic alliance. [The answer is that] the use of their winning cards and the strengthening of their influence depend on the [establishment] of mutual understanding. [For example], neither of the two partners can succeed in bringing about stability in Iraq without coordinating and cooperating with the other. Similarly, withdrawal of one side from the alliance would lower the effectiveness of, and the potential benefit from, their joint winning cards, i.e. Hizbullah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. While Iran is a principal source of aid, in both money and weapons, to these forces, Syria serves as an artery along which this aid is transferred to them.

"Should Syria withdraw from the alliance with Tehran, it would doubtless lose not only Hizbullah but also essential aspects of the support given to Hamas - namely, funds and weapons. Likewise, if Iran decides to abandon the alliance with Damascus, it would lose the main artery for the transfer of the logistical, economic, and military aid it provides to [Hizbullah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad].

"It follows that a decision by one of the sides, i.e. either Syria or Iran, to part with the other ally would entail voluntary renunciation of most of the winning cards at the disposal of both sides - which in turn would weaken their position in negotiations with the West.

"It seems that both Damascus and Tehran realize this well enough. It seems, too, that the Americans, Europeans, and Israelis have also begun to grasp the essence of the situation, even though they still have not relinquished on attempts to break up the relations between Damascus and Tehran." [27]

#### Syrian Government Daily: The Syria-Iran Alliance is Prepared to Proceed to the Next Stage

On March 2, 2007, following Assad's visit to Iran, Mikhail 'Awadh, a Lebanese columnist for the Syrian government daily Al-Thawra, wrote: "The Syrian-Iranian alliance should be given credit for sustained opposition and confrontation vis-à-vis Western plans, in the face of the acquiescence by all lands and nations to America's uncontested rule and to Washington's hegemony over the entire world and the developments therein. For 15 years, since the fall of the Soviet Union, there has not been a single force in the world capable of saying 'no' to the Americans... except for the Syrian-Iranian alliance, along with its forces and allies..."

"In the context of [Assad's] visit [to Iran] and its outcome, [there have appeared] statements, understandings, and

indications showing that Syria and Iran recognize the accomplishments of their long-term strategic alliance, and that the leaderships of both countries... have consciously resolved to become a decisive force that directs events and forges the future [of the two countries]. Syria and Iran have firsthand knowledge of the scope of the crisis that the U.S. is facing in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, as well as in the [rest of] the region, in light of the changes in the balance [of power] in the international arena. They know [the crisis that besets the U.S.], just as a craftsman knows his craft and a farmer knows the fruits of his labor - since it was the [Syria-Iran] alliance that was the source of changes and modifications, as acknowledged by everyone including [the American] government establishment, judging by the recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton report...

"Syria and Iran are well aware that the region is rapidly advancing towards a stage of vacuum, as it has been called, following a setback in the Western plan. Still, they are prepared to manage this stage and are quite capable of doing so, [their intention] being to fill this void in accordance with the Arab and Muslim interests and to end the decades of imperialist rule in the region...

"Syria and Iran know very well that the people and the nations in the region are more entitled and qualified to manage affairs [than any other force], for at present they are capable of bearing the burden and fulfilling their historical role [independently]. There is no need whatsoever for other countries to step into the shoes of the [West], whose rule in the area is diminishing and in crisis...

"Having won the battle against the failing U.S. and Western plans, the Syria-Iran alliance is prepared to coordinate the next stage - which will be, in practice, determined by this alliance and its role, and will be characteristically Arab and Muslim [i.e. not influenced by foreign elements]." [28]

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[1] Kayhan (Iran), February 19, 2007.

[2] IRNA (Iran), July 19, 2007.

[3] Teheran Times (Iran), February 18, 2007.

[4] Teshreen (Syria), February 12, 2007.

[5] Al-Markaziyya News Agency (Lebanon), July 23, 2007.

[6] Mehr (Iran), July 20, 2007.

[7] It should be noted that, according to Nourizadeh's report, the new agreement between Tehran and Damascus - in addition to the secret articles - also comprises open issues relating to economy, culture, science, tourism, and technology.

[8] Similar information was offered by Lebanese MP Akram Shahib, member of the Democratic Encounter group headed by Walid Jumblatt, who contended that during his visit to Damascus, Ahmadinejad gave Syria a free hand in the Lebanese issue, provided there was no detrimental effect on Sunni-Shi'ite relations in Lebanon. Al-Hayat (London), August 4, 2007.

[9] Al-Sharq al-Awsat (London), July 21, 2007. In December 2006, Nourizadeh wrote on his blog that Iran and Syrian were maintaining contacts with Sa'd bin Laden, the son of Osama bin Laden.

[10] Kayhan (Iran), July 22, 2007.

[11] IRNA (Iran), July 22, 2007.

[12] Al-Sharq Al-Awsat (London), June 16, 2006.

[13] Ali Reza Nourizadeh's blog, December 22, 2006. <http://www.nourizadeh.com/archives/002463.php>

[14] Teshreen (Syria), March 13, 2007.

- [15] IRNA (Iran), March 12, 2007.
- [16] Al-Nahar (Lebanon), March 11, 2007.
- [17] Al-Safir (London), June 2, 2007.
- [18] IRNA (Iran), April 21, 2007.
- [19] IRNA (Iran), July 19, 2007.
- [20] Jomhuri-ye Eslami (Iran), March 19, 2007.
- [21] Mehr (Iran), March 15, 2007.
- [22] Al-Thawra (Syria), March 18, 2007.
- [23] Al-Thawra (Syria), July 19, 2007.
- [24] IRNA (Iran), July 10, 2007.
- [25] SANA (Syria), July 10, 2007.
- [26] <http://www.thisissyria.net/2007/07/27/syriatoday/13.html>
- [27] <http://www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?syseq=58483>
- [28] Al-Thawra (Syria), March 2, 2007.
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