

## **Syria, Iran, and Hizballah: A Strategic Alliance**

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### **Abstract**

The Syrian Ba'ath party led by Bashar al-Assad is in complete control of the country, but with an international embargo, an expensive conflict, and a severe interruption of the economy, it is almost impossible for the government to continue the war without assistance. This essay focuses on the strategic alliance between Syria, Iran and Hizballah; and how their relationship is influencing the civil conflict in Syria.

**Key Words:** Syria, Iran, Hizballah, Bashar al-Assad, Ba'ath party, Arab Spring

### **Introduction**

It comes to no surprise that the Arab Spring that swept the Middle East in 2011 has created difficulties to those who are trying to hold power in the region. With the fall of President Mubarak in Egypt and Colonel Qadhafi in Libya, it was only natural that the tight reign of Bashar al-Assad in Syria would be the next one to be challenged. The difference is that the overthrowing of al-Assad has not been as successful as those done in Egypt and Libya; on the contrary it has been terribly violent, destructive and has created an incredible amount of instability within the Middle East. Two years into the conflict, with an end nowhere in sight, more deaths are piling up, more cities are turning into ruins, and more people are being displaced. But who is supporting al-Assad in this military enforcement of his own people? In order to answer this question, it is imperative to look at who has been a solid supporter to Syria and the al-Assad regime in the last couple of decades; they are the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hizballah. Although the relationship between the two states and the terror organization has had its ups and downs, the benefit of keeping the al-Assad regime present in Syria is extremely important for both Iran and Hizballah because Syria has been the center state that has facilitated the growth of Hizballah and their communication with Iran. "The overthrow of Assad is the worst thing that can happen to Iranian government and Hezbollah. Iran will lose its only ally in the Arab world, and Hezbollah will lose one of only two patrons and its entire over-ground logistics network." (Totten, 2012) In order to understand the importance this relationship and how Hizballah and Iran are influencing the current conflict in Syria, it is imperative to understand their history.

## Syria

Since the 1963 coup d'état, the Ba'ath party has ruled Syria. This event brought to power Hafez al-Assad, the man who took the presidential position in 1971, and was in power until his death in the year 2000. The al-Assad regime is composed from a Shiite sect called the Alawites, a minority group that only encompasses around twelve percent of the total Syrian population and has received preferential treatment by the government. One of the best examples of this type of preferential treatment is the fact that since the Ba'ath party took over; ninety percent of the military officers are from the Alawites sect. "This group of young 1960s officers are today's flag officers and senior defense officials...the Assad regime has carefully utilized sectarian tensions to maintain control of its armed forces." (Holliday, 2011) Despite the fact that Syria is Sunni Arab in its majority (around sixty percent of the Syrian population), during the forty years that the al-Assad regime has been in power, it has ignored this majority, while creating a strong foundation for the minorities within the military and Ba'ath Party Political establishment. (Holliday, 2011) The other minorities present in Syria are the Christians and the Kurdish. These two minorities only compose around twenty percent of the Syrian population, yet they received key military positions, and more political advantage than the Sunnis. Thanks to the positions and benefits given to them, they have supported and will continue to support the al-Assad Regime. Yet they are very fearful of what a Sunni Islamist government could do if it takes over, more exactly they are fearful of a Muslim Brotherhood government in Syria. (Holliday, 2011).

With such a difficult internal relationship, the al-Assad regime was still able to become a powerful international power, thanks to its relationship with Iran, and its support for several terrorist international organizations. Syria, along with Iran, are known as some of the most active states that sponsor terrorism; this has been an integral part of the way that both countries created and addressed foreign policy. (Byman, 2005)

## Syria-Iran Relationship

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, having the support from another Arab state has been incredibly important for Iran, they needed an ally that had common enemies (such as Israel, and Western Powers), and could share its ideology and political identity. (Mohns & Bank, 2012) The relationship between both countries has been an integral part of the way that international policies have unfolded in the Middle East, especially within the Israel ó Palestinian Conflict. Both states have funded and supported and controlled terrorist organizations that are anti-Israel, eventually becoming major players for the Palestinian Cause. "Arab nationalism, the Palestinian cause, and the Baath regime became inexorably intertwined." (Byman, 2005) Syria was also the first Arab country to recognize the government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan after the Islamic Revolution, and the third worldwide following the Soviet Union and Pakistan. (Goodarzi, 2009)

While the interests and ideologies of both states have clashed at times (especially after Bashar al-Assad became the President of Syria), their relationship is still rock-solid. One of the most important ideological differences that both countries share is the fact that Iran has completely rejected any type of negotiations or conversations with Israel, while Syria has stated multiple times that it will engage in negotiations with Israel "given certain conditions in a peace deal would be met, to normalize bilateral relations." (Mohns & Bank, 2012) Up until 2005, Syria was the most important actor in the relationship, it had the benefit of being right next to Lebanon, giving Iran access to Hizballah, and the financial drain that the Iraq óIran War has left within Iran. (Goodarzi, 2009) Nowadays Tehran is the most important partner of the alliance because it is in the process of acquiring nuclear capabilities; on the other hand Syria is now considered the junior partner in the

alliance. (Totten, 2012) After being an important player, Syria has lost the majority of its political power when it was forced to retire from Lebanon, and with its present civil conflict.

The relationship began in 1980 when Iran was at war with Iraq. Iran was the weaker of the two and was in need of help, so Syria offered its support by allowing them to establish training camps within its domestic borders, and by deploying troops from within Syria. (Samii, 2008) This alliance made both states natural partners in future endeavors, and in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon, Syria saw itself at an incredible disadvantage but it had a partner: the Iranian government. "Threatened with a loss of its painfully gained position in Lebanon, Tehran seized the opportunity and deployed 1,000 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) personnel to Lebanon's Bekaa valley. This number quickly peaked at 1,500 and then leveled out at between 300 and 500." (Byman, 2005) This was one of the most important events of the Iran-Syria alliance; Doctor Jubin Goodarzi calls it "the high point of bilateral cooperation." While it was an important moment, it was hardly the only time that both states have relied upon each other to create a stronger ally, especially after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union. It was important that both countries worked together to continue pushing for a strong anti-western force within the Middle East.

Another important event that has united these two countries is the overthrowing of their common enemy Saddam Hussein. When the 2003 US intervention in Iraq began, both countries were pleased to see the fall of Hussein, but needed to be wary of who would be taking control of Iraq, it was just as important for both states that Iraq would not fall into an internal conflict as much as that there would not be a Western ally in power. In order to create a stable relationship with the Iraq, Iran worked with major political players to create a bridge towards a better relationship while Syria allowed small influx of insurgent into its territory to give them sanctuary. (Goodarzi, 2009) Even to this day, the support of another Arab country is extremely important for both Iran and Syria, due to the fact that Iran has challenged the entire international community by starting its own nuclear program, and Syria has been slowly losing the power that it once had. (Samii, 2008) With Syria's current situation, the state is in terrible need of assistance from its loyal allies, and Iran has vowed to continue to support and maintain its ties with Syria. But Iran is not the only one that is supporting the al-Assad regime during its current conflict, the "A-Team of terrorism" (Husseini, 2012) Hizballah, one of the most important factors that has come out from the collaboration between Iran and Syria is also pulling for Bashar to stay in power.

### **Syria-Hizballah Relationship**

Syria's history of supporting terrorist organizations is not a secret to anybody. Thanks to its location, the easy access that it has to Lebanon's territory it has allowed Iran for many years to arm and train Hizballah while providing them sanctuary within the Lebanese territory. (Byman, 2005) Hizballah would not be the important player that it is today if it would not have been for the support that it received from both Syria and Iran. "Hizballah has gone from being a marginalized group of radicals to having member serve in the cabinet of legislature while simultaneously maintaining an armed militia." (Samii, 2008) While we can trace the beginning of Hizballah all the way up until the 1960s, when there was a Shiite revival within Lebanon. (Rabil, 2007) It was not until the second invasion of Israel in 1982 that Iran started to equip, prepare, and completely indoctrinate them into religio-political theories from the Ayatollah Ruholla Khoemini. (Samii, 2008) All of this training was possible thanks to Syria who had control of the Lebanese borders and was allowing Iran to supply Hizballah. "Hizballah resisted Israel's onslaught without substantive Syrian support. By partnering with Hizballah, Syria hoped to defy isolation and reclaim its role as a pivotal power in the region, as well give the Asad regime a new lease on life." (El-Hokayem, 2007)

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Throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s Hizballah would accommodate its policies and complied with the commands of Syria, especially after the signing of the Taif Agreement or otherwise known as the National Reconciliation Accord. A document that would put an end to the civil war in Lebanon, it would disband and disarm all militias, while recognizing the relationship between Syria and Lebanon. (Rabil, 2007) Thanks to the control that Syria had over Lebanese politics, everything would work out so Hizballah would stay armed and would continue with their path for the Palestinian cause while putting pressure onto Israel. "Syria's policy towards Hezbollah and the support of its militant activities allowed it to boost its own Arabist credentials and wall of criticism of its engagement in the peace process." (Mohns & Bank, 2012) With other treaties signed years after, such as the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination and the Lebanon-Syria Defense security agreement, Syria would acquire more and more power over and within Lebanon, leading not only to Islamizing the whole country, but to eventually allowing Hizballah to become a mainstream political party. (Rabil, 2007)

Syria's support for Hizballah has not been a free ride for the organization. During the early stages of the group (especially when Syria had control over Lebanon) the al-Assad Regime would help the group become stronger while holding a very tight grip. Daniel Byman calls this type of support "antagonistic sponsor of terrorism, helping individual groups become stronger but also working to control them." (Byman, 2005) Some examples of Assad's power over Hizballah are: in 1982 when Hizballah soldiers kidnapped the acting president of the American University in Beirut on orders from Iran but without his consent; he threatened to expel all Iranian forces from Lebanese territory; or in 1987 when Syrian troops shot and killed 27 Hizballah fighters because they refused to obey orders from a Syrian officer. (Rabil, 2007) While al-Assad's tight grip did not discourage the collaboration, it did make it difficult, but with so much at stake for both Hizballah and Syria the alliance was permanent. Shaykh Na'im Qassem Hizballah's Deputy Secretary stated in his book that "It was only natural that Hizballah's views concur with those of Syria, for no one is safe from Israel ambitions." (Qassem, 2005) He also goes into describing the relationship as neither mandatory nor accidental, but because of regional realities, it is a utility and a necessity. In 2000, when Hafiz al-Assad passed away, he was succeeded by his younger and inexperienced son, Bashar al-Assad, a person that not only lacked the leadership and credentials, but also lacked legitimacy and credibility internationally and domestically. (El-Hokayem, 2007) Hizballah, Syria and Iran would continue with their alliance, in the words of the Hassan Nasrallah the Secretary General of Hizballah:

The Resistance will continue and we will remain in our positions even after the completion of the withdrawal because a new file will be opened, which is the file of Palestine and Holy Jerusalem, which concern the entire Islamic World. (Samii, 2008)

To continue the alliance would mean that Bashar would have to act just a like his father, and protect the regime's place as a major power within the Middle East. Bashar would rely upon anti-US designs to gain the trust of Iran and Hizballah, and remind the world that Syria is not changing its path. (El-Hokayem, 2007) But after the September 11th attacks on New York and Washington, DC things changed, it was reported that while Hizballah wanted to continue with hostilities and pressure towards Israel, Syria was calling for a restraint on those types of attacks. "Syria calls for restrained related to a fear of being targeted as a state sponsored of terror by the US military after 9/11." (Samii, 2008) Syria and Hizballah ideologies were going in different directions but they continued to work together. Their alliance was tested once again when Syria was forced out of Lebanon in 2005. Syria would not only lose control over Lebanese politics and

territory, but would also lose control over Hizballah. Thanks to this, the group gained more and more autonomy, becoming a more important and independent organization. (Mohns & Bank, 2012)

Hizballah today is more autonomous than ever, it can be said that "Syria today is more pro-Hizballah than Hizballah is pro-Syria." (El-Hokayem, 2007) Overall the ideological connection between Hizballah and Syria is gone (unlike Hizballah and Iran). While there might not be an ideological connection anymore, there is still a very important logistical connection between the two, and that is the easy access of Iranian armory. "Syria could theoretically cut off the supply of Iranian weapons to Hizballah as required by UN Security Council Resolution 1702" Further Hizballah could still be affected by changes in Damascus. Damascus retains leverage over Hizballah because it receives logistical support from Syria. (El-Hokayem, 2007) While this could have been a possibility prior the present Syrian conflict, nowadays it would never happen. Syria is in need of the few friends that it still has, and is not going to turn on them.

### **Present Syrian Conflict**

"As Shaab Yoreed Eskaat el nizam" the sentence that triggered what is today Syria's civil war. On March 6, 2011 a group of kids aged ten to fifteen were arrested for spray painting that sentence, which translates to "the people want to topple the regime." (Diehl 2012) After several attempts by their families and local clerics to mediate with their captor, Atef Najib first cousin of President al-Assad and Head of local security, the families were received with insults. "He told them to forget their children, go home to their wives, have sex and make more." (Diehl 2012) The news of the arrest traveled fast, and peaceful protest arose throughout the city. There were also smaller gatherings in Homs and Baniyas happening at the same time. ("Syria uprising: key events," 2011) Twelve days later on March 18, during a peaceful march that turned deadly in Dera'a, government forces killed three protesters. All protests were triggered by the arrest of the kids, but the overall message was for political freedom and the end of corruption in Syria. ("Syria uprising: key events," 2011) It is important to note that the majority of the protesters were predominately unarmed young males belonging to the Sunni community. (Holliday, 2011) After the kids were released it was easy to see that during their arrest they had been physically and mentally abused. "They were disfigured with marks of torture, including extracted fingernails." (Diehl 2012) After seeing the horror that these young men had endured during their arrest, protests broke out all over the country, and this would be the beginning of the current Syrian civil war.

When protesters erupted across the country on March 25 as demonstrators emerged from mosques packed for Friday prayers, the scale and breadth of the demonstrations seemed to take the Assad regime by surprise. Just one week after the first protest in Dera'a, significant demonstrations had erupted in six of the twelve provisional capitals and many more towns and cities. (Holliday, 2011)

With all of the demonstrations happening, Syria's military started to retrieve from Dera'a, "whether responding to the widespread protest or resetting in order to maximize flexibility." (Holliday, 2011) After the government exited the city, unrest kept growing and Bashar decided to re-enter the city and stop all protest once and for all. It created a system of isolation within the city by establishing check points, cutting of water and electricity, (Holliday, 2011) and using force to take control once again. "A key lesson the Assad regime may have taken is that violence could restore stability." (Holliday, 2011)

With Dera'a taken back by government forces with the use of direct confrontation towards the protesters, the al-Assad regime will continue its use of violence in other cities around Syria. This was working and the government was able to control the civil unrest, but when this method

was done in Homs everything changed, the government was not able to take back the city. "March clashes in Deraa sparked unrest, but it was the April escalation in Homs that fanned the flames." (Holliday, 2011) On April 22, after government forces were unable to break up the protestors in the city of Homs, they started shooting directly at the public. "Security forces killed more than 100 demonstrators across the country, marking the bloodiest day of the first six months." (Holliday, 2011) With more blood spilled and no control of the unrest government forces were met with a now stronger anti-government movement.

At the end of the first nine months of the conflict, The United Nations estimated that more than four thousand people were killed. ("Syria uprising: key events," 2011) A year after the conflict started it was estimated that more than seventy five hundred people had died. (Diehl 2012) Now a couple of months after the conflict's second anniversary, The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that around eighty thousand people have been killed, ("Syrian regime in," 2013) and another million and a half has been displaced into Iraq. "1,401,435 Syrians had registered as refugees in the region or were pending registration. This corresponds to 30 percent more than the total envisaged under the current Regional Refugee Response Plan by end June 2013 for which around 55 percent of funding has so far been received." ("UNHCR report says," 2013) With the conflict's end nowhere in sight, this number is just going to continue to increase.

For the last two years the al-Assad Baath Party has seen a constant battle with those who want to see a new form of government in Syria, this Sunni led revolution is putting pressure not only on the al-Assad Regime, but also on Iran and Hizballah. In an interview with the London's Sunday Telegraph, Bashar al-Assad was cited stating, "Syria is the fault line. If you play with it the whole region will erupt." (Gilligan & Sherlock, 2011) Both Iran and Hizballah have a tremendous amount of need for al-Assad to stay in power, due to the fact that a Sunni led government would damage their current alliance.

### **2011: The al-Assad, Iran and Hizballah Collaboration**

Looking at the devastation of the conflict, the amount of deaths and the destruction of infrastructure, it is difficult to see that the al-Assad Regime has any staying power. Currently Syria is economically filled with sanctions by the West on oil exports and banking transactions, and thanks to this, the Syrian pound has devaluated rapidly. (Bozorghmehr, 2013) With its continuous attacks to its own population, the al-Assad regime has isolated itself completely from the international community, except from its long time partners: Iran and Hizballah. Marine Gen. James Mattis, a former US force in the Middle East, stated: "Absent Iran's help, I don't believe Assad would have been in power the last six months." (Michaels, 2013) Major General Aviv Kochavi, the head of Israel's military intelligence also commented on the fact that both Iran and Hizballah are aiding Syria: "They are establishing a popular army, trained by Hizballah and financed by Iran." (Beeston, Coghlan, Pitel & Bremmer, 2013) Iran and Syria have supported each other through many conflicts, and this one is not an exception. They need each other too much, in order to continue to have the same amount of influence within the region. It is also safe to say that a post-al-Assad regime in Syria would be led by Sunnis and not Shiites; this would be a major blow for both Iran and Hizballah. Since the beginning of the relationship, al-Assad's regime has been Iran's closest ally, and it's the main connection between Iran and Hizballah. So if the current regime falls, there would be no way for Iran to continue its supply of arms, missiles and other types of arsenals to Lebanon and most importantly to Hizballah directly. (Diehl 2012)

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal, Burham Ghalioun, the former chairman of the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), claimed that a post-Assad government in Syria would reconsider its ties with Iran and Hezbollah and work to interrupt Iranian arms supplies to Hezbollah

through Syria. As a consequence the Islamic republic would lose its longest-standing Arab ally and access to Hezbollah. (Diehl 2012)

When the conflict first started neither Iran or Hizballah had publicly accepted any type of support towards Syria. Analyst and news reporters were putting the pieces together without actual verification. Sources close to both Iran and Hizballah admitted the support; but there was never an official confirmation. For example, a Lebanese Shiite who lives in Beirut stated in an interview in the beginning of the year:

“It has become common knowledge in Lebanese Shia circles that the militia group is playing a role in Syria. It is not a secret anymore. Hezbollah may not be talking about it openly but everyone knows they are going over there.” (Blanford, 2013)

As of May 2013, after two different attacks by Israel towards Syria (one in January and the other one in May), the question of aid from Iran and Hizballah to Syria was answered. This support was not a rumor and it was not a secret anymore, both parties came out and stated its support for the Syrian Regime. Israel’s attacks were done in order to prevent Hizballah from obtaining strong artillery, such as chemical weapons, which have already been used, and long range missiles that could possibly hit Israel, if shot from Lebanon. (Dagher, 2013) In a televised speech Hassan Nasrallah, the current Secretary General of Hizballah, issued a statement where he pledged complete support for the al-Assad Regime: “Syria has true friends in the region and the world that won’t permit Syria to fall in the hands of America, Israel and extremist groups.” (Dagher, 2013)

Iran also condemns Israel’s attacks against Syria. Ali-Abar Velayati, the foreign policy aide to the Supreme Leader, sent a clear message to the world especially to Israel, “An attack on Syria is considered an attack on Iran.” (“Iran says israeli,” 2013) Saeed Jalili the Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council also made a comment in support of Syria: “They will regret this recent aggression – this attack would have significant implications for Tel Aviv.” (“Iran says israeli,” 2013) Iran has also publicly supported the al-Assad regime by giving Syria a one billion dollar credit line, allowing Syrian importers to gather supplies directly from Iran, and aiding in the relief of Syria’s crippled economy. (Bozorghmehr, 2013) Both countries have signed a trade deal that would help booster the financing methods for the civil conflict, allowing al-Assad to continue to fight the rebels. “Overall, it is in Tehran’s strategic interest to keep Assad at the levers of powers in Syria” (Mohns & Bank, 2012).

With the continuous down spiraling of the conflict, could it be possible for Syria to lose support from either Iran or Hizballah? There have been a lot of different advisors within the Iranian government that think that they should distance themselves as much as possible from the al-Assad regimes. “Support for Assad is increasingly becoming a liability for the Iranian leaders, contradicting its self-image as the voice of justice, speaking on behalf of the Middle East’s downtrodden.” (Mohns & Bank, 2012) In the search for an Islamic ally, it is difficult to find Syria in that category, because it is claiming its power in an authoritarian and barbaric way and completely against the will of its people. (Mohns & Bank, 2012) But the Iranian government has not backed down, on the contrary First Vice President Mohammad-Reza Rahimi was quoted saying that their support was “unchangeable...Tehran will now support Damascus even more than before in the face of foreign pressures.” (“Regime vocal in,” 2012)

In respect with Hizballah, some of the second and third-tier cadres have stated certain criticisms against the organization’s support for the al-Assad regime.

“For a movement founded on principals of social justice and respect for the right to resist oppression, its support for a regime that violently cracks down on its own people would result in a severe blow to its credibility region wide, they believe that

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Hezbollah should become more vocal in its calls for the implementation of genuine political reforms.ö (Mohns & Bank, 2012)

But with the constant danger of a post al-Assad ruling, and the establishment of a Sunni government in Syria, the possibility of a complete halt of support is extremely minimal; Hizballah has too many important factors that would all come down in a post al-Assad Syria.

The current Syrian government is a vital ally for both Iran and Hizballah. With Iran's money and arms, and Hizballah military tactics, the regime has an upper hand on the rebels.ö This internal conflict is posing a serious threat to the Syrian Regime, the Iranian government, and the Hizballah organization, and with the strength of these three factors combined, Assad will not abandon his offensive strategy. öNo credible threat to the Assad regime's survival has emerged, despite crippling international isolation and increasing armed resistance.ö (Holliday, 2011)

Two years later, over seventy thousand people dead, more than one million people displaced, and there is still no end in sight; the current conflict in Syria is just getting worse and worse. Thanks to the support of Iran and Hizballah, the al-Assad regime is maintaining its staying power. Without the Ba'ath party and its control over Syria, the stability that it has created for both Iran and Hizballah would be gone. It is in both of their best interests to maintain that power while they can. The support that they have given and continue giving is detrimental for the existence of Bashar al-Assad and all of those who have served with him and for him. It is difficult to see where the al-Assad regime would be today if it wasn't for the amount of aid that it has received from both Iran and Hizballah.

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