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Iran banks all on Assad's survival

By Mahan Abedin
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The continuing unrest in Syria presents Iran with multiple challenges straddling the strategic, political and ideological spheres. While officially Iran is committed to the survival of the Syrian regime, the perceived gravity of the situation has led an increasing number of former Iranian diplomats and academics to voice concern over the Islamic Republic's failure to hedge its bets in Syria.

The fear - expressed in its most extreme form - is that the downfall of President Bashar al-Assad may lead to the collapse of the Iranian-Syrian strategic alliance, thus undermining the "resistance axis" in the region.

While these fears are exaggerated, nonetheless there is a widespread feeling in the country that the lack of nuance in Iran's position - and specifically the absence of any contact with Syrian opposition groups - is not configured to protect Iran's interests in what is by all accounts a highly significant political and strategic moment in the region.

Nevertheless, the Iranian government is confident that the Syrian regime can weather the storm, and that the situation is being deliberately exaggerated by Western media and intelligence services, who hope to extract strategic concessions from Assad further down the road.

Iran is also concerned by regional reactions to the crisis, especially by the pro-active Turkish position, which from an Iranian point of view is exploiting a putative humanitarian crisis to expand Turkish influence in the region. The real fear is not so much centered on Turkish

influence (which is viewed as relatively benign) but that Turkey is working at the behest of Washington and key European states to re-align Syria away from Iran.

The strategic alliance

The Iranian-Syrian strategic alliance is the oldest, strongest and most resilient in the modern Middle East. Its origins date back to the early 1980s at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, when Syria was the only Arab state to openly side with the Islamic Republic. The alliance was cemented by the emergence of the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, which Iran and Syria jointly sponsored, albeit for different reasons.

To the Iranians, Hezbollah represents foremost an ideological investment and a thorn in the eyes of Israel, whereas the Syrians look upon Hezbollah foremost as a reliable asset and leverage in the Lebanese political scene.

Most analysts describe the Iranian-Syrian alliance as one centered on strategic opportunity and needs, pointing towards Syria's decades-old rivalry with Iraq and the two countries' enthusiasm to exploit Lebanon's perennially unstable politics for strategic gain against Israel.

This characterization is accurate but it fails to take stock of the less opportunistic - indeed less strategic - elements of the alliance. Ideology is one important component of the alliance. Iran may be an Islamic state and Syria an avowedly secular one committed to the ideals of Ba'athist pan-Arabism (which some in Iran perceive as politically distasteful), but the two countries are united by the Arab world's and to a lesser extent Turkey's distaste for Shi'ite Islam.

The dominant Alawite sect in Syria (who make up 12% of the population) - alongside the Alevis of Turkey (who comprise 20% of the population) - belong to a folk tradition of Shi'ism that is markedly different to the scholastic religion of the Twelver Shi'ites, who form the majority in Iraq and Iran.

Orthodox Sunnis on the whole regard Twelver Shi'ism as a legitimate (albeit eccentric) form of Islam, but they are universally adamant that the Alawites and Alevis, owing to their esoteric beliefs and their estrangement from the devotional aspects of the Islamic faith, fall well outside the religious boundaries of Islam. Many devout Twelver Shi'ites share this perception and regard the Alawites and the Alevis as essentially non-Muslim.

However, owing to political considerations the late Imam Musa Sadr (the Lebanese cleric who mobilized Lebanon's downtrodden Shi'ite community in the 1970s) allegedly issued a *fatwa*, declaring the Alawites to be an intrinsic part of the diverse global Islamic family.

This political position was seized on with great enthusiasm by the rulers of the newly-founded Islamic Republic of Iran who were anxious to cultivate a reliable ideological ally in the face of region-wide Sunni Arab hostility. Consequently, there is a widespread perception in official Iranian circles that the Syrian regime is politically Shi'ite, even though in stark contrast to their Iranian counterparts, Syrian officials have no time for Islamic rituals and mannerisms.

All things considered, the alliance with Syria is a critical component of Iran's regional foreign policy. It is partly through Syria that Iran has developed Hezbollah into a regional strategic force and brought the Islamic republic and its potent political culture right on Israel's door steps. Moreover, less dramatically, Syria's relative estrangement from the Arab world facilitates Iranian political and ideological penetration of the Arab street and helps to contain and offset hostile Saudi maneuvering.

An Islamic awakening?

It is precisely because of Syria's critical importance to regional Iranian policy that in recent weeks more and more former Iranian officials and academics have begun to speak out against the lack of complexity and nuance in Iran's policy vis-a-vis the perceived deteriorating situation inside Syria.

The site for the expression of this dissent is [Iranian Diplomacy](#), an extremely well-networked and well-informed analytical website that is ostensibly run by foreign policy "experts". In reality it is managed by a network of former and retiring diplomats and their friends in the universities who appear to be politically aligned to the reformist factions in the Islamic Republic. Although firmly anchored in the official Iranian world view, Iranian Diplomacy nonetheless offers serious and at times scathing criticism of official policy.

Regarding the disturbances in Syria, Iranian Diplomacy dissented from the official line early on by highlighting the use of excessive force by Syrian security forces and by drawing attention to some of the legitimate demands of the Syrian opposition. Writing for the website, Tehran University Professor Ali Bigdeli delivered a scathing critique of official policy by drawing a comparison to Turkey's "smarter" approach towards the putative political crisis in Syria. According to Bigdeli, the unrest in Syria has emboldened Turkey to escalate its involvement in Arab affairs with a view to assuming leadership of the Arab world.

The putative political crisis in Syria has enabled academics like Bigdeli, who write from a nationalistic point of view, to question the very existence of the deep alliance between Iran and Syria. These academics draw attention to the Syrian regime's Arab nationalist ideology, and by extension Syria's strong support for Arab causes, including Arab countries' territorial claims on Iran.

For example, Syria supports the United Arab Emirates' territorial claims on the Iranian islands of Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb in the Persian Gulf, an ideological position which sits uneasily next to Syria's alliance with the Islamic Republic.

Writing for the same website, former Iranian ambassador to Lebanon, Mohammad Edrissi, alludes to Assad's growing problems but discounts the likelihood of the Iranian-Syrian alliance collapsing, even in the event of regime change in Syria.

According to Edrissi, owing to Syria's profound enmity with Israel, the former will have to rely on "resistance" groups (and by extension Iran) in order to offset Israeli pressure. Edrissi also

claims that Lebanese Hezbollah is revising its attitude towards the situation in Syria by requesting Assad to treat the issue of political reform more seriously.

Edrissi's comments may be viewed as a reflection of the views of certain senior Iranian officials who want the Islamic Republic to publicly urge Assad to go down the route of political reform and reconciliation with his less vociferous opponents.

It is fair to say that a growing number of Iranian officials are concerned that Iran's unequivocal support for Assad and the ruling clique in Damascus is tarnishing the Islamic Republic's image in the Arab world. Indeed, Iran risks coming across as hypocritical and a practitioner of double standards (precisely the same charge that the Islamic Republic levels at its Western opponents) by praising the revolutionary movements in countries like Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain, while adopting a markedly different view on Syria.

The Islamic Republic has characterized the region-wide protests that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and which have since convulsed much of the Middle East and North Africa as an "Islamic Awakening" but have pointedly omitted Syria from this putative region-wide Islamic revolutionary movement. It appears that there is a growing recognition in ruling circles in Tehran that this posture is unsustainable, particularly if internal and external pressure continues to mount against Assad.

But to what extent has Iran practically committed itself to the survival of the Syrian regime? According to the United States government, the Islamic Republic has provided material support to Syrian security and intelligence forces and actively aided the suppression of the protests in Syrian cities. But talking to Asia Times Online, Iranian intelligence sources flatly deny these allegations and dismiss them as part of Washington's psychological warfare against the Islamic Republic.

Indeed, talking to Iranian officials it appears that there is deep unease about the methods employed by the Syrian security forces which have allegedly killed up to 2,000 people since protests and violence erupted in March. In private, Iranian officials draw a comparison to how professionally Iranian security forces responded to widespread rioting and disorder in the wake of the disputed presidential elections of June 2009.

They claim (with some justification) that the disorder was quelled with minimum loss of life.

Talking to Asia Times Online, Iranian intelligence sources deny that Iran has "exported" riot control or any other security-related expertise which could be used against the Syrian people. These sources refer to the profound differences in political culture and a lack of political will in Tehran to interfere directly in Syrian affairs. But Iranian intelligence sources admit that they have lent support to their Syrian counterparts in the field of psychological warfare and information management.

Talking exclusively to Asia Times Online, Iranian intelligence sources claim that they have provided "material" and "decisive" support to their Syrian counterparts on ways to defeat the intelligence-gathering and propaganda operations of Western intelligence services. They claim

that Western intelligence, in particular American, French, British and German services, are coordinating extensive intelligence-gathering and psychological warfare operations against Syria, from the Lebanese capital Beirut.

A post-Ba'athist order?

Despite growing realization in Tehran that the country's rhetorical posture towards the events in Syria is unsustainable, by the same token there is widespread confidence that Assad will weather this storm, albeit by emerging weaker in the long term.

The Iranians provide a multitude of reasons why Syria will survive, the most immediate of which are the resilience of the Syrian regime (and the ferocity of its security establishment) and the divided nature of the Syrian opposition, the majority of whom hail from a Sunni Islamist pedigree. But deep down Iranian officials believe that Assad will survive because owing to his foreign policy posture and his impeccable anti-Zionist credentials, his regime is somehow more "connected" to the deepest aspirations of his people, indeed the people of the region as a whole.

This essentially ideological assessment complements Iran's strategic reading of the so-called Arab Spring as an "Islamic Awakening", and one whose long-term geopolitical consequences will strengthen Iran's position at the expense of the United States and Israel.

But outside the confines of officialdom, while most independent Iranian experts and observers may share the general assessment that Assad will probably survive, they are beginning to worry aloud about the consequences should the Syrian regime either be overthrown or become emasculated by its increasingly emboldened enemies.

The cause for the greatest worry is a lack of complexity in Iran's policy and the near total absence of any outreach to Syrian opposition groups. It is noteworthy that the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood is one of the most hostile to Iran in the Arab world.

It is entirely conceivable that any diminution of Alawite political power in Syria (let alone the downfall of Assad and the ruling clique) will re-orient Syria towards the Sunni Arab political order at the expense of Iran. Under this scenario, even if the Iranian-Syrian alliance endures in one form or another, the Islamic Republic's position on the eastern banks of the Mediterranean Sea will become increasingly vulnerable.