

SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS DURING BASHAR
AL-ASSAD PERIOD: A TEST CASE FOR ALLIANCE
THEORIES

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ABSTRACT

SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS DURING BASHAR AL-ASSAD PERIOD: A TEST CASE FOR ALLIANCE THEORIES

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This thesis aims to analyze Syrian-Iranian relations during Bashar Al-Assad period within a theoretical perspective. In this context, after giving a review of alliance theories of international relations along with the roots of the close relations, course of relations during 9/11 events, 2003 Iraq War, 2006 Lebanon War, and Syrian uprisings will be examined within the framework of alliance theories. The thesis argues that alliance theories, when taken one by one, are not sufficient to explain the establishment of this alliance as each scholar usually makes an overemphasis on a single factor such as internal threat perceptions or external threat perceptions or identity construction and so forth. It is intended to offer an alternative approach to understand the motives behind Damascus-Tehran alliance by combining all these factors as well as focusing on international, regional as well as national dynamics contributing to this alliance behavior. This study also asserts that although the Syrian uprisings posed major threats against the alliance, Damascus and Tehran did not change their policies towards each other as the relations are still of the same importance for both.

Keywords: Syria, Iran, Alliance Theories, Syrian Uprisings, 9/11 events.

ÖZ

BEŞŞAR EL-ESAD DÖNEMİNDE SURİYE- İRAN İLİŞKİLERİ: İTTİFAK TEORİLERİ ÇERÇEVESİNDE BİR TEST

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Bu çalışma Beşar Esad dönemi Suriye-İran ilişkilerinin ittifak teorileri çerçevesinde incelenmesini amaçlamaktadır. Bu çerçevede uluslararası ilişkilerde ittifak teorilerine ilişkin bir değerlendirme yapılmasının ve iki ülke arasındaki yakın ilişkilerin başlangıcına değinilmesinin ardından, ittifak teorileri çerçevesinde 11 Eylül olaylarını, 2003 Irak Savaşı'nı, 2006 Lübnan Savaşı'nı ve Suriye'de son dönemde yaşanan isyanları analiz edilecektir. Bu çalışma, her bir teorisyenin iç tehdit algısı, dış tehdit algısı ya da kimlik inşası gibi belli bir faktöre odaklanması sebebiyle, ittifak teorilerinin tek tek ele alındığında söz konusu ittifakın oluşumunu açıklamada yetersiz kaldığını savunmaktadır. Bu nedenle Şam-Tahran ittifakına alternatif bir yaklaşım getirerek, uluslararası, bölgesel ve ulusal dinamikler de dikkate alınarak ittifak teorilerinde dile getirilen faktörlerin bir kombinasyonu ile analiz yapılmaya çalışılacaktır. Bu çalışma ayrıca, Suriye'de yaşanan ayaklanmaların ittifakı tehdit ettiğini, ancak ilişkilerin halen aynı öneme sahip olması sebebiyle Şam ve Tahran'ın birbirleriyle ilişkilerinde herhangi bir değişim olmadığını belirtmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, İran, İttifak Teorileri, Suriye Ayaklanmaları, 11 Eylül Olayları.

To My Parents and Beloved Husband

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HAMAS	the Movement of Islamic Resistance (<i>Harakah al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah</i>)
IRGC	Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republic

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Syria and Iran created the most enduring alliance of the Middle East for more than three decades, and their rhetoric and policies have always been subject of criticism over the last years as all these caused anxiety in the region and international arena. While sharing the same hostility towards foreign interference and pragmatic understanding of alliance formation, the two countries also managed to adapt their policies to each other's and to economic needs and constant changes in the regional balance of power. As a consequence of this alliance based on common enemies, allies, political and economic interests and similar religious affiliations, both powers have economically, politically and militarily supported one another in times of need and expanded their regional influence. This alliance is called in different ways like narrowly-defined, pragmatic, ever-changing "marriage of convenience," "strategic alliance" or "strange bedfellows," yet its sustainability in such a troubled region has been very striking.

Within this framework, the main aim of this thesis is to explain the formation and evolution of Syrian-Iranian relations with a more emphasis on Bashar Al-Assad period, the nature of this regionally unusual alliance and its surprising sustainability over decades. With a view to have a better understanding of this alliance, not only the actual developments will be examined, but also main points of alliance theories will be tested on these events. All in all, this thesis aims to fill the void and analyze the alliance in the 2000s by focusing on its creation, 9/11 Events, 2003 Iraq War, 2006 Lebanon War and Syrian uprisings and its compatibility with alliance theories. It is hard to say that there is sufficient studies and literature on the subject especially for the Bashar Al-Assad period, not to speak of the theoretical approach based on alliance theories, and it was a great obstacle while working on this thesis. Besides lack of rich literature, one of the other obstacles throughout the study has been the toughness of applying the theory on ongoing

events as the Al-Assad period has not finished yet. The lack of enough resources on the issue and its theoretical analysis made it hard for me to work on the matter, but it is the same reason which pushed me to work harder in order to make a contribution to the issue literature available.

In regards to the literature on Syrian-Iranian relations, there has been a great deal of debate among scholars and analysts over what made their alignment surprisingly enduring on contrary to the general tendency regarding alliances in the region. Yet, there is not much work done on analysis of the relations on the basis of alliance theories and concepts mentioned above. As it can be seen in Jubin Goodarzi's book of *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*¹, most of the studies in the field focus on the Syrian-Iranian relations on the basis of the chronology of regional events and their effects on the relations. Goodarzi, in his book, analyzes the chronology of regional and inter-state developments and their influence on Damascus-Tehran alliance along with the role of super powers Russia and the US till 2005. Despite using some of the key concepts at some points, he does not provide a thorough analysis of the issue in terms of alliance theories. In another study of Goodarzi titled *Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment*², he draws the conceptual framework of the alliance by giving a limited idea on some of the concepts of alliance theories as well. The article gives the reader a brief idea on the events took place between the two countries since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 till the first stages of the Syrian uprisings. Jubin Goodarzi also provides an overall evaluation of the basis of the alliance between the two countries by making a restricted reference to some aspects of alliance theories at the first parts of his study.

There are also studies examining the foreign policy behavior in the context of

¹ Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006).

² Jubin Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment* (Ortadoğu Etütleri, Vol. 4, No. 2 (January 2013)).

international relations theories as well as the regional and international dynamics, and their role in shaping the two country relations such as the book of *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*³ by Anoushirvan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch. The book examines the relations till 1990s and basically focuses on the nature of the alliance in terms of foreign policy and decision making processes of the two countries and their reaction to regional and global systemic factors.

On the other hand, in one of the most recent books on the issue, *The Syrian-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*⁴, Nadia von Maltzahn studies Damascus-Tehran relations within the framework of the role of cultural diplomacy and soft power in their foreign policies. Examining the nature of the cultural relations between the two countries, von Maltzahn concludes that the cultural relations could not go beyond the official level and remained very limited in public level. Additionally, Fred H. Lawson, makes an analysis of the relations in terms of “alliance dilemma”⁵ understanding in his article of *Syria’s Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance*⁶. Lawson summarizes the regional events and course of Syrian-Iranian relations in line with these events during 1990s till mid-2000s and tries to briefly see the relevance of alliance dilemma to the issue. He concludes that Syrian-Iranian relations shows the importance and relevance of Glenn Snyder’s theory of “alliance dilemma” as Syria’s partnership with Iran has a direct effect on its policies towards its rivals.

In a different example, seeing the relations basically as a security cooperation, Degang

³ *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London, Routledge: 1997).

⁴ *The Syrian-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London, I.B. Tauris: 2013).

⁵ For more information on the concept, please see: Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Jul., 1984): 461-495.

⁶ *Syria’s Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance* (Middle East Journal, Vol. 61 No.1, (2007)).

Sun comes up with a new understanding of “quasi-alliance” believing that the existing alliance theories fall short in explaining the two country relations his article titled “Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited.”⁷ In his paper, Sun focuses on the two country relations between 1979-2009 in terms of Quasi-alliance understanding which is mainly based on military and security cooperation against a third party by neglecting the economic, social and cultural aspects of the relations.

As it can be seen from the examples of studies on the topic, most of the literature available –which is very limited especially for the Bashar Al-Assad period in Turkish and English– focus on chronology of the events along with reasons and nature of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Furthermore, these studies do not present a comprehensive analysis of the relations within the framework of alliance theories of international relations. In this sense, bilateral relations of Syria and Iran will be analyzed in chronological order within the framework of the basic principles of alliance theories in this thesis. As the main focus of the study will be Syrian-Iranian relations during the Bashar Al-Assad period, a more detailed analysis of the relations during 2000s will be made under specific events which can be identified as the test cases of the alliance after giving a brief summary of the developments which triggered the alliance.

Alliance is usually regarded as a “formal (or informal) commitment for security cooperation between two or more states” in which all members seek to improve its power, security and influence.⁸ States have been in search for allies for a variety of strategic reasons and in this way improvement of power, security and influence were sought. Alliances and their origins have been one of the most debated issues of international relations. There is an extensive literature on alliances in international arena.

⁷ “Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-Alliance Revisited” (Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia), vol.3, no.2 (2009)).

⁸ Stephen M. Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” *World Politics* 61 (1), (2009): 86.

Regarding the question why alliances are formed, the roots can be divided into three:

1. Collective provision of national security against a perceived threat:
 - Against an external threat,
 - Against a domestic threat,
2. Alliances shaped by social, cultural and political similarities,
3. Alliances as tools to constrain the behavior of states.⁹

Most of the alliance formation literature stem from the assumption that the states have the tendency to form alliances for security reasons as this area is dominated by the realist and neorealist approaches. Classical realism, which focuses on the role of human nature, sees international relations as a field of struggle for power between states pursuing their own interests. The core assumption within this framework is that states as the most important actors of international politics are the unitary rational actors which calculate the costs of alternative choices to maximize their own power.¹⁰ Besides sharing the same assumptions with classical realism, neorealism asserts that state behavior is constrained by the structure of the anarchic international system, which is comprised of states with similar functions and interests which use force to pursue their interests. Weak states seek for alignments with one another in order to balance against more powerful states (aggregation of power) since power is distributed unequally.¹¹ In this regard, Martin Wight describes alliance as a means for reinforcing the security of the allies or to promote their interests in the external world.¹² Therefore, aggregation of power understanding brings about the assumption that the allies value each other for the

⁹ Wolfgang Piccoli, "Alliance Theory: The Case of Turkey and Israel," *Copenhagen Peace Research Institute* (August 1999): 3.

¹⁰ Robert O. Keohane, "Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond," in Ada Finifter, ed., *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (Washington D.C., 1983): 164-165.

¹¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison Wesley, 1979): 161-170.

¹² Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (New York: Molmes & Maier, 1978): 122.

provision of military assistance as the main function of forming an alliance is to enhance security, military power and reduce external threats.

Stephen M. Walt, on the other hand, modified these realist assumptions to focus on threat, rather than power regarding how states choose their allies in the international arena. While maintaining the assumptions of balance of power theory about the role and nature of the international system, he added that states do not necessarily align against the strongest foreign power, but against the most threatening. According to him, “An alliance (alignment) is a formal (or informal) commitment for security cooperation between two or more states, intended to augment each member’s power, security, and/or influence.”¹³ The most important component of alliances is “commitment for mutual support against some external actor(s).”¹⁴ States choose allies to balance against the most serious threat. Validity of external threats and balance of threat theory are seen as the main basis of alliances. In this manner, states make alliances not to balance power but to balance threats. Stephen Walt redefines this understanding into “balance of threat” by including threat perceptions into the approach.¹⁵ In this understanding, states are not seen as threat not only in terms of their material resources, but also there should be a threat perception in the first instance. A state can be perceived as a threat not only because of its material capabilities but also because of geographical proximity, offensive capabilities and perceived intentions.¹⁶

Regarding Walt’s theory, alliance formation is also dependent on how states choose sides in conflict, either balancing or bandwagoning. Walt defines balancing as “allying with others against prevailing threat,” and bandwagoning as the “alignment with the source

¹³ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987): 1; Stephen M. Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” *World Politics* 61 No. 1 (January 2009): 86.

¹⁴ Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” *World Politics* 61 No. 1 (January 2009): 86.

¹⁵ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 22-26.

¹⁶ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 22-26, 263; Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” 89.

of danger.”¹⁷ Bandwagoning tendency is motivated by the will to appease the dominant power, the desire to gain profit from the victory of the dominant power or both, and is mostly confined to weak and isolated states and states “bandwagon when allies are simply unavailable.”¹⁸ Usually, the states which are not able to find adequate support are more inclined to bandwagon. It requires trust, which means that an ally can become an enemy in anytime as it “involves *unequal exchange*.”¹⁹

Balancing is for preventing stronger states from dominating the weaker ones, and “states join alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a threat.”²⁰ And Walt states that balancing is much more common than bandwagoning behavior since statesmen cannot be sure what others will do, and bandwagoning “increases the resources available to threatening power and requires placing trust in its continued forbearance” while intentions may change anytime.²¹

Another component of alliances can be seen as ideological dimension. An ideological explanation of alliances would suggest that states with similar domestic characteristics and structures are more likely to align with one another. Although ideology seems like a natural cement for alliances, most of the studies on alliances, especially the ones related to realist and neorealist schools of thought, limit the role of ideology. Usually conflict is seen more important than ideological closeness as George Liska puts it, “Alliances are formed primarily for security rather than out of sense of community.”²² In the same way,

¹⁷ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19-47; Walt, “Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia,” *International Organization* Vol. 42 No. 2 (Spring, 1988): 279.

¹⁹ Walt, “Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia,” 279.

²⁰ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962): 11-12.

Walt also argues that ideology has little impact on alignments than balancing motive, yet it has an important but limited role, and conversely it can be more divisive than unifying sometimes. In fact, alliances among dissimilar states occur just as frequently as do those among similar states.²³ What is more, ideological solidarity is the most powerful when ideological factors and security considerations reinforced each other. With regard to alliances between similar states, ideological conformity is often ignored when it conflicts with security interests.²⁴

Walt produces four generalizations of the role of ideology. Firstly, when there are no direct external threats against the states, ideology is more likely to be a factor. Secondly, as a result of emergence of divisions and competing factions within the movement and states' unwillingness to sacrifice sovereignty, ideologies that seek to bring the member states into a single entity might fail. Thirdly, nationalism is the most widespread form of ideological cohesion among states, but this kind of solidarity usually does not go beyond symbolic gestures. Lastly, there may not be a real distinction between ideological solidarity and external threats; i.e., when a state lacks legitimacy it may align with similar states in order to balance against a threat of ideological subversion. Therefore, Walt indicates that ideology plays a very limited, yet often exaggerated role in most alliances and, depending on the nature of the ideology, it may actually result in division rather than unity. Therefore, ideology should not be ignored, but should not be treated as a primary factor in alliance formation.²⁵ However, common ideologies usually pose an obstacle against durable alliances as each state has the potential to claim itself as the legitimate leader and ask for others to give up their rights and sovereignty in order to

²³ *Ibid.*, 33-43, 266; Walt, "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia," 313; Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," 89.

²⁴ Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence*, 33-43, 266; Walt, "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia," 313; Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," 89.

²⁵ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 33-40.

create a new unified organism. In other words as Stephen M. Walt puts it, common ideology may become an obstacle against unity and bolster competition for leadership.²⁶

In line with the remarks on ideology, Jubin M. Goodarzi makes an emphasis on the importance of alliances in the Middle East and shows that generally the main goal of regional actors in forming alliances is to diminish threats posed by other regional powers or alliances. Goodarzi claims that the allying powers will overcome their ideological differences in the event of facing an immediate threat, and adds that ideological factors assume more significance in the absence of a security challenge. However, there is clear evidence that the regional powers are more likely to form alliances with extra-regional actors that are willing to support their political objectives.²⁷

In another perspective, Randall L. Schweller adds another pillar for alignment and states that alliances are not only formed in terms of security considerations, but also in order to reach political aims. Schweller categorizes states as revisionists and status quo supporters.²⁸ Revisionists ally for changing the existing world order, and the status quo supporters ally as a reaction against this. The main aim of the alliance is seen as a tool to utilize from the outcomes of an alliance and compatibility of political goals. Therefore, balance of interests rather than balance of threats comes to the scene in the understanding of Schweller.²⁹ For him, “alliances are responses not only to threats but also to opportunities.”³⁰

²⁶ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 35-36, 206-212 and “Why Alliances Endure or Collapse,” 163.

²⁷ Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006): 1-2.

²⁸ Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994): 74-85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁰ Randall Schweller, “New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Walt’s Balancing Proposition,” *American Political Science Review* 91:4 (1997): 928.

There seems a general emphasis on the role of external threats and security aspect in forming alliances. These approaches base their assumptions on the fact that individual states prefer to establish a collective security system in order to block threats. In line with this understanding, especially realism focuses on power politics and systemic dynamics. Neorealism also emphasizes external threats while critical theories also mention internal threats and focuses on “aggregation of power” and “balance of power.”

Some other alliance theorists like Steven David brings about an approach focusing on internal threats by taking the example of third world countries. According to him as the rulers are unable to have legitimacy in the eyes of all segments of the society, they start to perceive other power elites who are keen on power-grab as the primary threat and ally with external powers. As the rulers would use all their power against internal threats, they would have to ally with external powers to secure their external security. As the ruler is looking for balancing both internal and external threats, David names his theory “omni-balancing.”³¹ Third World states usually have an atmosphere of multiple threats; therefore, the leaders have to prioritize among threats by aligning with secondary adversary to be able to focus on the prime adversary. According to David, the Third World leaders calculate which outside power is most likely to do what is necessary to keep them in power, identify the most significant threat to their regime and choose allies accordingly.³²

Micheal N. Barnett, on the other hand, as a constructivist, relates alliance building to identity politics which shapes identification and construction of threats and allies.³³ As

³¹ Steven R. David, “Explaining Third World Alignment,” *World Politics* Vol. 43, No. 2, (January 1991): 233-237.

³² *Ibid.*, 245-251.

³³ Micheal N. Barnett, “Identity and Alliances in the Middle East,” in Kanzenstein, P.J. (ed.) *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: 1996): 466; Philipp Müller,

identity consequently brings about the concept of “other,” it comes to the forefront in terms of defining threats and security measures and policies against this threat as well. Therefore, similar identities may help building common norms between actors/allies, and threats emerge from the violations of these rules by a rival. It is more of a rivalry over images and self-presentation other than military power.³⁴ He states that identity influence alliances in two ways: First, it provides theoretical leverage over the construction/definition of the threat; second, it makes some more desirable than others as partners. Yet Barnett does not prioritize one or another and says, “Far from suggesting the primacy of identity and the irrelevance of material forces, I recognize that both are important explanatory variables though with different casual weights at different historical moments...Identity, first, provides a better conceptual link to the construction of the threat than do anarchy and other materialist derivations and, second, potentially informs us to who is deemed an attractive ally.”³⁵ In the absence of an immediate threat, identity plays a crucial role in determining the choice of allies. In this manner, maintenance of mutual identity, having a common historical narrative and common perspective for future gives the alliance continuousness. Yet, whenever the circumstances change and collective identity is no longer acceptable, alliance may collapse.³⁶

The Middle East has always been a region where alliance politics played a significant role in shaping regional politics. Yet, the characteristics of this region comprising of mistrust and insecurity made the Middle Eastern alliances shifting and short-lived in nature. Under these systemic circumstances, the durability of the Syrian-Iranian alliance is usually seen exceptional and sometimes even assumed to be a result of sectarian

“Driving Forces behind Alliance Building in the Middle East,” *Beitrage zur Internationalen Politik und Sicherheit* Nr. 01/2011: 4.

³⁴ Barnett, “Identity and Alliances in the Middle East,” 400-466.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 446.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 446.

bonds leaving aside all other factors. Yet, when the motives and reasons behind this alliance in regards to domestic, regional and international developments are analyzed in light of theoretical approaches to alliance formation, it appears natural rather than an extra-ordinary or surprisingly long-lasting formation since most of the assumptions for alliance formation seem to match. Especially the realist emphasis on security's main role in shaping the alliances comes to the forefront in regards to Tehran-Damascus alliance. Therefore, this thesis concludes that in contrast to comments making emphasis on the sectarian dimension of this alignment, the alliance proves to be a security-based one in line with the realist assumptions.

In light of the theoretical assumptions above, in this study, the reasons of durability of the Syrian-Iranian alliance will also be questioned. It seems that the existence of overlapping strategic interests, similar understandings of pragmatic and rational elites and trust and dependency between the regimes in the course of international and regional developments nurtures this relationship; therefore, these dynamics will be analyzed with the help of historical and current events. All these factors which made this alliance favorable and irreplaceable for both Damascus and Tehran will be tested within the analytical framework of alliance theories. The study will show that Syria's alignment with Iran can be viewed as an attempt to balance against perceived external and domestic threats within a complex system. Adding to that, the small size and defensive nature of the alliance, shared religious affiliations and identities, and ability to compromise when needed added extra value to this alignment in the eyes of Tehran and Damascus. Besides, as Rothstein states, "once an alliance has been created, there is positive value placed on continuing it, even if it seems to perform very few functions."³⁷ By taking all these factors into consideration, the two country relations will be treated as multidimensional and as the result of many different, yet interrelated factors and will be analyzed in this respect.

³⁷ Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968): 119.

To elaborate on the analysis of the issue, this thesis is separated into three different periods of the historical developments of the Syrian-Iranian relations. In this regard, the periods of 1979-2000, 2000-2011, and lastly the period of uprisings will be examined in three main chapters. The first period to be handled starts with 1979 as this year has been the turning point for the two-country relations as the regime change in Iran sowed the seeds of this alliance. During 1979-2000 period, Hafez Al-Assad was in power in Syria and the developments in these years laid the foundations of Syrian-Iranian partnership. With the death of father Al-Assad, Bashar Al-Assad's period started in 2000; therefore, this period till the uprisings are analyzed in another chapter with a more detailed look into 9/11 Events, 2003 Iraq War, and 2006 Lebanon War. In the following chapter, the very recent Syrian uprisings and its implications as well as future scenarios are examined. In each chapter after giving a historical background with chronology of events, theoretical analysis of these events are provided. After underlining the details of the relations and making brief theoretical analysis of the events in three sections, this thesis seeks to find out the characteristics of this alignment along with its compatibility with the theoretical framework of alliances.

CHAPTER 2

SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS DURING 1979-2000

1.1. Historical Background

Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Syria and Iran had no reason to maintain any form of cordial ties, and mistrust was the dominant attitude between the two countries. Iran under the Shah regime was tightly linked to the US, Western powers and Israel in contrast to Syria which was governed by the nationalist pan-Arab Ba'ath party since 1963 and was anti-Israeli, anti-American and more in Soviet orbit. Arab nationalism was perceived as a primary threat to Iranian security and regional interests by the Shah, and Syria was also seen as a threat regarding its close ties with the USSR. On the other side, till the Islamic Revolution, Syria perceived Iran as an imperialistic source of threat to Arab nation with its policies as an instrument in the hands of the US as well as a potential threat to its regional interests and a cause of instability in the region. As a reflection of this hostility, the Syrian government even called for the liberation of Arab region from the Iranian influence and occupation, and printed maps showing Iran as part of the Arab territory. Iran, in response, made an official protest as well as withdrawing its ambassador and diplomatic staff from Damascus in 1965.³⁸

With Hafez Al-Assad's coming to power in 1970, Syria began to follow more pragmatic policies, and to this end started to warm up the relations with Iran despite ups and downs. Strained relations cooled down with the Iranian logistical, non-military and medical support during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Following the war, Iran provided loans and grants for Syrian development projects. Bettering relations led to Hafiz Al-Assad's first visit to Iran in 1975 which also brought about ministerial-level exchanges

³⁸ Lorenzo Trombetta, "Syria and Iran in a Middle East in Transition," *Geopolitical Affairs Special Issue: Shia Power: Next Target Iran?* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring 2007): 314; Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, 13-15.

and strengthening of economic, cultural and political relations. Upon these developments, Tehran aimed to utilize Damascus to counter Iraq, while Syria's goal was to use Iran's intermediacy as a tool to better relations with the US and have an advantageous position in its conflict with Israel. However, this period of rapprochement failed with Iranian monarch's rejection to lend assistance concerning Al-Assad's will to use the Shah's influence on the US to reach a more balanced solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict. Shah, on the contrary to Syrian stance, supported Sadat's peace initiative towards Israel which aimed at obtaining a peace settlement.³⁹

Following this period, the collapse of the monarchy in Iran as well as Syria's increasing disadvantageous political situation and isolation in the region has strongly changed the course of relations between the two countries. During the father Al-Assad period, common perception of threat, convergence of interests regarding Lebanon and Iraq, shared perspectives towards Palestine, Israel, and the US helped both countries to maintain the alliance whereas Syria was careful about not to be directly hostile towards the US as well as keeping Iran off domestic issues of Syria. Tehran and Damascus were quite capable of eliminating and resolving their disagreements and dissimilarities besides collaborating on many matters while the sense of regional isolation brought these two powers together. Following the 1979 Revolution, both Damascus and Tehran were similarly left with a few reliable alignments. The countries which had good relations with Shah regime (such as Morocco, Egypt Saudi Arabia, Iraq) were wary of the new regime in Iran, while the ones against the Shah started to build good relations with Iran like Libya and the Shiite movements in Iraq and Lebanon. Syria, in the same way, was almost left with other options but to ally with Iran with an Egypt pursuing separate peace process with Israel and deteriorating unity efforts with Iraq.⁴⁰ During this period, as both countries faced difficulties in the region and somehow left with not much

³⁹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*: 15-16.

⁴⁰ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*: 18-19.

options, when one of them made overtures, the other side did not stay uninterested and responded positively.

Right after the overthrow of Shah, Syria had been the first Arab country to recognize the new regime and praising the Iranian people's victory. The main impetus of the relations came from Iranian revolution of 1979, yet the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 also brought the two countries together as Syria provided extensive diplomatic and military assistance to Iran, and as a result, Iran managed to get Iraqi forces out of its territory in 1982. Iran, in return, would provide help during Israeli invasion of Lebanon through Hezbollah⁴¹ to push Israel out of Lebanon.⁴²

In the same year when the regime changed in Iran, the unity talks of the Baath party of Iraq and Syria collapsed and their relations deteriorated. Besides, Iraq was very suspicious of Iran's ideology and its rising influence thinking that Iran's revolutionary Islam would destabilize Saddam Hussein's regime. On the other side, Saddam Hussein saw the turmoil in Iran as an opportunity to wage a war to gain some territories, overthrow the Islamic regime and become a major regional power.⁴³ In addition to many reasons, fear of a possible rebellion among its own Shia population for a religious government pushed Iraq to invade Iran in September 1980 as the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War and the war continued until 1988. In the meantime, Syria and Iran's mutual antagonistic position towards Iraq was a major reason for their rapprochement and forming of an alliance during the Iran-Iraq War. Iran was in serious need of Syria as the

⁴¹ *Hezbollah means "Party of Allah/God" and it is a Shi'a Islamist militant group and political party in Lebanon.* For more information please see: Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁴² David Wallsh, "Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* Vol. 37:2 (Summer 2013): 112.

⁴³ Patrick Brogan, *World Conflicts* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989): 261.
Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment," *Ortadoğu Etütleri* Vol. 4, No 2 (January 2013): 41.

army was in disarray due to Khomeini's dismantling the Shah's army in terms of revolutionary changes.⁴⁴ In addition to military support, Syria became the beacon of diplomatic support for Iran. Al-Assad even called Baghdad's move as "the wrong war against the wrong enemy at the wrong time"⁴⁵ while providing diplomatic and military support to Iran. During the November 1980 Amman Summit aiming to reach a unity and solidarity in the Arab world, Syria stood against the emergence of an Arab alliance against Iran, deployed troops at its border with Jordan, and persuaded some Arab League members to boycott the meeting; therefore, Damascus managed to prevent Arab League efforts to disadvantage Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.⁴⁶

Additionally, Damascus provided military assistance, facilitated the Iranian air strikes against Iraqi military airfields at H-3 in April 1981 which brought about the destruction of almost 15-20% of Iraqi air forces.⁴⁷ In 1982, alliance between the two countries was made concrete through an economic accord and a secret military agreement with the visit of a Syrian high-level delegation headed by the Foreign Minister Abdal-Halim Khaddam. Following the visit, a series of offensives continued, and Syria deployed army units to its border with Iraq. Damascus' aid to Tehran was very significant as it closed Iraq's oil pipeline running through its territory. It reduced Iraqi oil exports more than a million-barrel a day.⁴⁸ In return for Syria's cutting off the Iraqi pipeline transit, Iran provided Hezbollah with a considerable amount of financial and personnel support in

⁴⁴ Thomas Juneau, Sam Razavi (eds.), *Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001: Alone in the World* (Routledge: New York, 2014): 45, 59.

⁴⁵ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 357.

⁴⁶ "Persian Gulf: Split at the Arab Summit", *TIME Magazine US*, 8 December 1980.

⁴⁷ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988): 180; Hirschfeld Yair, "The Odd Couple: Ba'thist Syria and Khomeini's Iran", in Moshe Ma'oz and Avner Yaiv (eds.) *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986): 107-108.

⁴⁸ "Syria, Iran and Iraq," *Library of Congress Country Studies*, 1987.

order to make Southern Lebanon an essential buffer zone between Israel and Syria. Iran also offered energy assistance to Syria.⁴⁹ Taking all these into consideration, the early 1980s had been the formative phase of a long-enduring alliance.

During the period of 1982-1985, the close cooperation and mutual response to challenges in Gulf and Levant regions continued. The alliance against Saddam Hussein continued after the withdrawal of Iraqi forces away from Iranian soil. Iran decided to continue the war and invaded Iraq in 1982 July in order to overthrow the Iraqi Baathist regime and the conflict became a war of attrition. As Iran refused to finish its hostility with Iraq besides the continuing Gulf conflict, the axis of Iraq-Jordan-Egypt arose with the support of Washington and Riyadh which led to the relative decline of Syrian-Iranian power in the region. US' concern that Saddam Hussein might be defeated brought about the Washington-Baghdad rapprochement, Reagan Administration provided intelligence and non-military equipment to Iraq and eventually the diplomatic relations between the US and Iraq were restored in the end of 1984. Concomitantly, Moscow and Paris also supported Iraq with their military assistance in order to prevent an Iranian victory. For the Russian side, the main reason to support Saddam Hussein was the reciprocal enmity between Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Islamist Iranian regime, while France was wary of the danger of proselytism of the Islamic Revolution. As a result, by the spring of 1985, Syrian-Iranian power had reached its limits and was contained by regional and extra-regional power coalitions.⁵⁰

During the course of Iran-Iraq War, another important event was taking place in another front: Israeli invasion of Lebanon. With the invasion which took place in June 1982, relations between the two countries entered into a new phase. While seeking for benefits in cooperation with Shiite groups in Lebanon and trying to gain leverage, the conflict

⁴⁹ Degang Sun, "Brother's Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance Revisited," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2009: 71.

⁵⁰ Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment," 43.

also served as an extension of the two countries' anti-American and anti-Israeli policies. At first, Iran was too dependent on Syrian support and aid in Iraq War. Later with the invasion, during 1982-1985, Syria became more dependent on Iran as Damascus required Iranian assistance in checking Iraq and mobilizing Shiites in Lebanon to repel Israeli and Western forces as Iran seemed willing to be a supportive actor in the field. Thus, when the Syrian Air Force and Army was in difficult situation against the Israel Defense Forces in the Beqaa Valley and in West Beirut, Tehran's intervention supporting Damascus brought about some balance to the relationship between the two countries. Iran's ideological, economic, military, logistical, and intelligence support was decisive regarding Damascus' struggle in Beirut and other parts of the country which were occupied by Israeli soldiers and were also controlled by Christian militias. In the meantime, to discuss the details of Iranian support and to offer the provision of Iranian volunteers and special units' members to be used in the battle, a delegation led by the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Akhbar Veliyati visited Damascus on 17 June 1982. However, the offer was declined by Hafez Al-Assad who was wary of the consequences of such an extensive support as it had the possibility to undermine Syrian sovereignty in Lebanon and to foster military and ideological expansionism of Tehran.⁵¹ During the struggle, Hafiz Al-Assad pursued a two-track approach against Israel. The keystones of this approach were his allies Soviet Union, Iran, and the Lebanese. Within the framework of this strategy, Damascus would utilize Iranian influence over the Lebanese Shias to start a campaign to overthrow and launch a guerilla war against the Gemayel government, the Israeli, the US and French union of the Multinational Force in Lebanon. Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel was assassinated in September 1982 followed by the demolition of Israeli Defense Forces headquarters' in Tyre in the same year. What is more, the US Embassy in Beirut was destructed in 1983, barracks of the Multinational Force were bombed in 1983, IDF headquarters were again demolished in 1983 and the US Embassy annex in Beirut was also bombed in 1984. On the other side,

⁵¹ Lorenzo Trombetta, "Syria and Iran in a Middle East in Transition," *Geopolitical Affairs Special Issue: Shia Power: Next Target Iran?* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring 2007): 316-317.

Al-Assad aimed at rebuilding and expanding Syria's conventional forces with Soviet assistance to deter any Israeli first strike and to reach an equal strategic level with Israel. All in all, the strategy worked well and the Israeli retreated while the US and French troops also withdrew by 1984-1985.⁵²

Although Iran-Iraq War, 1982 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon and all other regional developments created a common ground for Tehran and Damascus, it was not possible to say that the relations between the two countries were functioning smoothly with no disagreements. Period between the years 1985-1988 had witnessed the most problematic era of the relations. Both countries started to have conflicting agendas both in the Persian Gulf and the Levant regions. After the withdrawal of Israel and Western powers, Syria failed to end Lebanese Civil War, while Iran continued the Iran-Iraq War, and all of these undermined the alliance. With the decrease of Israeli threat, Tehran and Damascus started to follow opposite policies in Lebanon. Syria aimed at establishing a stable and secular state in line with its sphere of influence, whereas Iran wanted to create a theocratic system reflecting its own model. In the meantime, there were disagreements came to the front over which Shiite factions would be supported in Lebanon. As Syria supported Amal⁵³ while Iran supported pro-Iranian Hezbollah movement which was rising at the expense of the secular pro-Syrian Amal militia also led to rising tensions and clashes. Additionally, Syria supported its proxy Amal when it led siege of Palestine refugee camps between 1985-1987 while Iran tried to mediate and end the conflict peacefully.⁵⁴ Regarding the control of Tripoli in north Lebanon, Iran chose to support Islamist movement Tawhid against the movements supported by Syria.⁵⁵

⁵² Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment." 42-43.

⁵³ *The Amal Movement is a Lebanese political party associated with Lebanon's Shia community. It was established as the "Movement of the Dispossessed" in 1974. For more information please see: Rodger Shanahan, Shia of Lebanon: Clans, Parties and Clerics, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005).*

⁵⁴ Maltzhan, *The Syrian-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East:* 35-36.

⁵⁵ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East:* 143-157.

On the other hand, Syria went against Tehran's ambitions to topple Saddam's regime. In 1990s, Damascus supported the US-sponsored Arab-Israeli peace process while Iran denounced it.⁵⁶ Iran was so determined to wage a war against Iraq which caused many states to back Iraq and led to the isolation of Iran. Al-Assad administration favored a negotiated settlement. At the same time there were the issues of Syrian-Jordanian rapprochement which bettered the two-country relations and made Jordan an important transit for Syrian businessmen in Palestine as Jordan established diplomatic relations with Israel, discontinued Syrian-Iraqi negotiations, and Syria's confrontation with the Sunni Islamic Unification Movement of Shaikh Said Shaban in Tripoli, Lebanon.⁵⁷

However this kind of disagreements did not have a significant effect of straining the relations to the extent that the alliance would be abolished. Despite all these, the two allies managed to prioritize their interests, resolve their differences and define cooperation parameters again adding to the maturation and consolidation of the alliance. These discrepancies strained the relations at first until an agreement was reached that Iran would have the dominant role in the Gulf while compromising on issues regarding the Levant.⁵⁸ This ability to compromise and adoption of policies compared to each other's diversifying interests and policies helped the two regimes to fortify and perpetuate their alliance. This inherent feature of both countries' will to maintain their special alignment can be seen in their mutual ability to consult one another, negotiate and reach mutually agreed deals especially when their different interests clash. As they manage to resist significant setbacks, reach joint solutions and have the ability to

⁵⁶ "Reshuffling the Cards? (I) Syria's Evolving Strategy," *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report No: 92 (14 December 2009): 7.

⁵⁷ Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment," 44.

⁵⁸ Özgül Erdemli, "Does Ankara Read the Cards of the Hands of Strange Bedfellows?" *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 4 (Winter 2005): 3-4.

compromise on important issues in the areas of interest (Levant and the Persian Gulf) in difficult times and turbulent circumstances, the Tehran-Damascus axis proves to be mature, strong, durable and institutionalized.

By the end of 1980s, Iraq remained to be the dominant power in Gulf Region as it regained its power and turned the war to its favor against Iran in Iran-Iraq War. Furthermore, Soviets started to withdraw their support from Syria, and the US influence had been escalating. Additionally a counter axis was created between Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and North Yemen in February 1989 as it was named Arab Cooperation Council. In the meantime, General Michel Aoun, the commander of the Lebanese army, started an anti-Syrian revolt which created a great opportunity for Saddam Hussein to hit Syria by providing arms to Aoun's forces. Thus, the need for cooperation between Tehran and Damascus increased due to the situation in Lebanon. During the conflict, Iran mobilized Hezbollah along with other Lebanese groups against Aoun and he was defeated in the end in 1989.⁵⁹ All in all, all these circumstances proved that the bilateral cooperation was inevitable despite several disagreements between Damascus and Tehran, and all of these developments cemented the relationship.

It is also possible to say that Hafiz Al-Assad tactfully managed to remain independent and to keep the balance between Iranian interests versus Arab countries' interests. As a good example of this equilibrium, while supporting Iran during the Iran-Iraq War; despite the risk of annoying Iran, Syria joined the US-led coalition of Operation Desert Storm which ended successfully during 1990-91 to avert Iraqi troops from Kuwait. These difficulties or differences could not change the course of the relations to negative.⁶⁰ During 1991 Kuwait crisis, Iran remained neutral while Syria joined US-led

⁵⁹ Gary C. Gambill, "Michel Aoun: Former Lebanese Prime Minister," Middle East Intelligence Bulletin Vol. 3 No. 1 (January 2001), https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0101_ld1.htm.

⁶⁰ Mohsen Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," The Washington Quarterly 36:4 (Fall 2013): 79, <https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/24384/uploads>.

coalition to be able to cut down Saddam Hussein and reap the benefits of siding by the victors. What is more, George H. W. Bush's promises to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and to accept of Syrian presence in Lebanon was also a big encouraging element for Syria's support.⁶¹ During this time, Al-Assad did not let its alliance with Iran slide and visited Tehran, received assurances from the clerical leadership that Iran would maintain its neutrality and abide by the UN sanctions on Iraq. The two powers also established a Joint Higher Syrian-Iranian Cooperation Committee chaired by their vice-presidents and foreign affairs ministers to bolster close political, economic and military ties through regular consultations in September 1990.⁶²

Following Iran's victory over Iraq in the 1990-1991 Gulf War and the end of the Cold War, Syria and Iran preserved their cooperation depending on a couple of reasons. First of all, dominance of the US in the region and the world with the dissolution of Soviet Union created a disadvantageous environment for both countries not to mention the uncertainties arose in the region. Secondly, Syria was in need of Iran in Arab-Israeli conflict in order to promote its activities in Lebanon with the help of its influence over Hezbollah and utilize its fighters in attacks against Israeli forces in self-declared security zone in southern Lebanon. Additionally, Syria also wanted to use Iran in the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations with Israel and the US Thirdly, their common enemy Saddam Hussein was still in power. Fourthly, the two countries undertook a joint program to acquire capability of manufacturing ballistic missiles domestically with the assistance of Russia, China and North Korea mainly because of Iraq's success in using surface-to-surface missiles against Iran in the first Gulf war, and against Israel in the Kuwait conflict; while it was indirectly related to Israel's overwhelming superiority in

⁶¹ David Wallsh, "Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* Vol. 37:2 (Summer 2013): 115; Lorenzo Trombetta, "Syria and Iran in a Middle East in Transition," *Geopolitical Affairs Special Issue: Shia Power: Next Target Iran?* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring 2007): 320.

⁶² Maltzhan, *The Syrian-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, 38.

conventional and non-conventional weapons against Syria as well.⁶³

In 1990s, both countries gave support to Islamic movements like Hamas⁶⁴ and Islamic Jihad.⁶⁵ The suicide attacks which were also targeting Israeli civilians helped to destroy trust to success of the peace process. Pro-Israeli stance of the US in the Arab-Israeli negotiations, its support for a Turkish-Israeli alliance after 1996 in order to isolate Iran and discourage Syria, and its willingness to exploit Iran-Gulf Arab differences to justify its military presence and huge arms sales to its regional allies boosted Tehran-Damascus alliance in the period after the Cold War. The rapprochement between Turkey and Israel at the expense of Ankara's relations with Damascus and Tehran, emerged as the new serious threat to the regional interests and security of the Syria and Iran.⁶⁶ As the two allies were against any kind of Western or Israeli domination in the region, both countries would also aim to contain Turkey in the mid-1990s as Turkish-Israeli relations were improving in this period. Therefore, common security interests once more helped to reinforce the Tehran-Damascus relations.⁶⁷ At the end of the Cold War, Syria's loss of the USSR as an important strategic partner was an important development as well regarding its dependency on arms coming from the Soviets had to be compensated. As

⁶³ Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment," 46-47.

⁶⁴ *Hamas (Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah / Islamic Resistance Movement) was a small faction of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, it was not a new movement at all. From the beginning of its emergence, it utilized the network and institutions established earlier by the Muslim Brotherhood. Before the First Intifada, Hamas was a social and religious movement with no political platform. This Islamic Resistance Movement was born with the First Intifada in 1987.* For more information, please see: Micheal Irving Jensen, *The Political Ideology of Hamas: A Grassroots Perspective* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Asad Ghanem, *Palestinian Politics after Arafat: A Failed National Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

⁶⁵ *The Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine is a Palestinian Islamist organization founded in 1981. Its main aim is the destruction of the State of Israel and the establishment of a sovereign Islamic Palestinian state.* For more information, please see: Shaul Bartal, *Jihad in Palestine: Political Islam and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁶⁶ Sun, "Brother's Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance Revisited," 72.

⁶⁷ Erdemli, "Does Ankara Read the Cards of the Hands of Strange Bedfellows?" 5-6.

such, Iran became Syria's new arms supplier which increased the dependency of Syria on Iran. Meanwhile, Syria and Iran cooperated in militarily aiding Hezbollah and Hamas to be able to shape the events in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories along with pressuring Israel.⁶⁸

2.1. Chapter Conclusion with Theoretical Analysis

Common external threats (such as pro-Iraq coalition during the Iran-Iraq War, and the Israeli-American coalition in Lebanon after the 1982 Israeli invasion) can be seen as the cement of Syrian-Iranian alliance. Moreover, the alliance-formation for the regional middle powers (like Syria and Iran) may arise from the need to break extreme dependency.⁶⁹ As the realist theory assumes, any imbalance which brings instability triggers counterbalancing acts. Moreover, with the collapse of pan-Arab order in 1980s as it started to clash with state sovereignty, state nationalisms, and Islamist ideologies and increase in most Arab states' dependence on American power brought about a power vacuum as well as creating the suitable environment for the formation of a new alliance to counter it. In this way, the alliance helped to weaken any attempts for the isolation of Iran and Syria. Syria-Iran alliance provided a useful leverage in both countries' relations with the US, and it is much more effective than they would have separately.

As the period between 1979-2000 shows, the alliance became asymmetrical from time to time as the degree of dependency to each other was not stable or equal. Right after the Islamic revolution, Damascus was more dependent on the support of Iran; however, this equation changed in favor of Syria following the start of Iran-Iraq War as Tehran was much more dependent on the assistance of Damascus. Yet, the effect of the alliance cannot be disregarded as it strengthened hands of both countries and enhanced their

⁶⁸ "Iran and Syria," *United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer* (2011).

⁶⁹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, 201-202.

position while bringing benefits in many areas. Syria managed to increase its regional power while Iran was able to have better access to Arab-Islamic world with an Arab ally which prevents emergence of a fully united anti-Iranian axis. Alliance with Syria also enabled Iran to respond to accusations of Tehran's Persian Shiite agenda and aims.

The regime change along with the change in Iranian policies and interests brought the two powers together. This change all of a sudden reshaped Iran's security perceptions and identification of threats and allies which came closer to that of Syria which was exactly the opposite before the Islamic Revolution. Therefore, theory of Barnett⁷⁰ regarding identity can be translated as similar understandings and perceptions at this point, and although the identities were not still similar, newly emerging similar understandings of that time can be said to help building common norms between these two countries. The new definition of self-image triggered the reconstruction of the threat as well as making Damascus a more desirable and acceptable ally than others. The material and logistical capabilities, regional and international circumstances along with the similar identities made these two countries' alliance much more durable.

As also indicated in various parts of this chapter, complimentary but at the same time different interests and roles of Damascus and Tehran made it easier for them to reach an agreement on many issues. What is more, the risk of clashes due to incompatibilities are also reduced to a remarkable extend since the priority areas of the two states had been different from each other as the Gulf for Iran and Levant for Syria. Their ability to consult each other and coordinate their policies also provided sustainability to the alliance in times of turbulence. As George Liska argues, consultation between allies reinforces the alliance and its cohesion since it is the key to acceptance of solidarity and equality among the members.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," 400-466.

⁷¹ Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence*, 69.

All in all, Syrian-Iranian alignment perfectly matches with the realist assumptions put forward by many scholars. Considering the domestic, regional and international developments, the two countries appears to be allying with each other in order to reinforce their security, break the effects of isolation and hostility towards them, and to promote their power, influence and interests in the external world. Increasing isolation and enmities they face in the region with the help of extra-regional actors brought about the need to balance against these threats and created an obligatory commitment for mutual support against these regional and international actors. Although from time to time some of the threats were weakened, emergence of new challenges and menaces kept the alliance alive and made it inevitable in the absence of any other possible partners.

CHAPTER 3

SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS DURING 2000-2011

Bashar Al-Assad was perceived as an open-minded president who would bring reform, modernization and change to the country but created a disappointment as he could bring minimal change and reform. He also did not change the course of the relations with Iran, and even the two country relations got more intense. To this end, Hafiz Al-Assad laid the base for the continuation of the alliance after his period by introducing his son Bashar Al-Assad to Iranian President Muhammad Khatami in May 1999 as well as some Lebanese interlocutors. Added to that, following Hafiz Al-Assad's death, Khatami indicated his hope that Bashar will follow his father's policy path.⁷²

In 2000s, Syria was under pressure in the regional and international arena. Death of Hafiz Al-Assad in 2000, 2003 Iraq War, escalation of the US' war on terror policy, Hariri's assassination in 2005 and 2006 Lebanese War as well as the ongoing Syrian uprisings all added to the isolation of Syria. Under these circumstances, Syrian-Iranian alliance continued almost in the same way as it was during the Hafiz Al-Assad period. Hafiz Al-Assad's death could have ruined the relationship between Syria and Iran, yet the two countries of the alliance made too much effort to preserve it due to all these regional and international reasons.

After Bashar Al-Assad became president, the political alliance became increasingly strategic with the increasing military and intelligence cooperation. However, the difference between the two Assads' periods was that unlike his father, Bashar Al-Assad was unable to keep the balance between the interests of Iran and the Arabs, especially Saudi Arabia, and became a target of their anger. Besides, he could not maintain the

⁷² Abbas William Samii, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship," *Middle East Journal* Volume 62, No: 1 (Winter 2008): 43-44.

relatively good relations with the West either. Thus, the cost of getting closer to Iran has been distancing from Arab countries and the West⁷³ which was not the case in father Assad's period. Yet, on the other hand, Turkish-Syrian rapprochement broke the total dependency on Iran while not directly affecting the alliance with Tehran.

Another disruption in the alliance might have happened with inauguration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran in June 2005. However, as in the case of Bashar Al-Assad's coming to power in Syria, both sides continued to work to ensure the continuity of relations. Al-Assad visited Tehran in August 2005, and Ahmadinejad made a visit to Damascus in January 2006.⁷⁴ During the visits, the two leaders announced an alliance to resist foreign pressures, signed protocols in various fields and Al-Assad declared support for Iran's nuclear efforts. Additionally, in June 2006, the two countries concluded their first mutual defense pact and Iranian Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar announced, "Syria's security is considered as part of the security and national interests of Iran... We find ourselves bound to defend it."⁷⁵

Apart from the changes in administrations, the two country relations faced many challenges and tests during Bashar Al-Assad period such as 9/11 events, Iraq War, Lebanon War and last but not the least Syrian uprisings. All these along with many other developments could not change the course of the relations, and Syrian-Iranian alliance still proves to be the most enduring and continuing one in the region. In order to have a deeper understanding of the relations, 9/11 events, Iraq War, and Lebanon War will be analyzed in this chapter. The ongoing Syrian uprisings, on the other hand, will be

⁷³ Mohsen Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," *The Washington Quarterly* 36:4 (Fall 2013): 80, <https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/24384/uploads>.

⁷⁴ Abbas William Samii, "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizbullah-Iran-Syria Relationship," 49.

⁷⁵ Andrew Tabler, *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*, (Lawrence Hill Books: Chicago, 2011): 119-120.

analyzed in the next chapter.

3.1. 9/11 Events

As, with the end of the Cold War, the option of balancing between the two superpowers was abolished, Syria chose to bandwagon with the hegemon US. In line with this understanding, it entered the anti-Iraqi coalition in 1990, joined the Madrid Peace Process, and even entered direct negotiations with Israel with the expectation that the US would broker an acceptable settlement and would enable Syria to recover the Golan Heights in return for peace with Israel as well as keeping itself away from the US' threat perception. This perfectly covers the bandwagoners' (Syria in this case) motive of aligning with the source of danger with the aim of gaining profit and avoiding an attack on himself by diverting it elsewhere.⁷⁶ Yet, on the other hand, Damascus did not stop using Hezbollah to keep military pressure on Israel in order not to lose its leverage totally.⁷⁷

The year 2000 and the first following years have witnessed different events. The changing circumstances led to Syrian-Turkish rapprochement starting with Adana Agreement of October 1998 which brought Damascus' recognition of PKK as a terrorist organization and accepted to cease its aid to PKK and to deport its leader Abdullah Ocalan. Following the Adana Agreement, security concerns arose with the 2003 Iraq War and isolationist policies towards Syria, Turkey's mediator role between Israel and Syria, and economic cooperation between Turkey and Syria brought about a positive shift in their policies towards each other.⁷⁸ By time the Ankara-Damascus partnership

⁷⁶ For more information on bandwagoning, Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994): 72-107.

⁷⁷ Ely Karmon, Ph.D., "Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas: A Coalition Against Nature Why Does It Work?" *The Proteus Monograph Series* Volume 1, Issue 5 (May 2008): 34-35.

⁷⁸ Christopher Philips, "Turkey and Syria," Turkey's Global Strategy, *LSE IDEAS Special Report* (May 2011): 34-39, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR007/syria.pdf>; Jordan Steckler,

gained impetus in diplomatic, economic, military and cultural levels and this rapprochement continued with ups and downs till the first phases of Syrian uprisings when Turkey announced its support for Free Syrian Army.⁷⁹ In the meantime, Turkish-Iranian relations were also improving positively. Therefore, in the absence of a direct threat and enmity, Turkish-Syrian reconciliation and partnership did not have a degrading effect on Iranian-Syrian alliance and did not change the course of relations between Tehran and Damascus.

On the other hand, in May 2000, Israeli Defense Forces withdrew from Lebanon which put an end to a twenty-two-year occupation. But this move from Israel put logic of Syria's military presence in Lebanon under jeopardy as this presence was justified by the protection of Lebanon from Israeli expansion.⁸⁰ This was followed by the death of Hafiz Al-Assad, and Bashar Al-Assad's inauguration in Syria while conservative and hawkish George W. Bush won presidency in the US. Last but not the least, with the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and rise of the understanding of "war on terror," hard-liner policies started to be imposed on the Middle East by the US administration.

Following the September 11 events, world was divided into two as supporters of war on terror and dissenters. Syria, as a continuation of its bandwagoning for profit policy, was willing to cooperate with the US as a long-time sufferer from Sunni Islamist groups in

Darrin Altman, "Strategic Depth or Strategic Drift?: Contending with Turkey's Rapprochement with Syria and the Middle East," Imes Capstone Paper Series *The Institute For Middle East Studies* (May 2011): 39-42, <https://imes.elliott.gwu.edu/sites/imes.elliott.gwu.edu/files/downloads/documents/Capstone-Papers-2011/Altman%20Steckler.pdf>.

⁷⁹ *The opposition movement in Syria has been fragmented from its inception, a direct reflection of Syria's social complexity and the decentralized grassroots origin of the uprising. This condition has plagued Syria's armed opposition since peaceful protestors took up arms and began forming rebel groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the summer of 2011.* For more information please see: Elizabeth O'Bagy, "The Free Syrian Army" *Middle East Security Report* 9 (March 2013), <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The-Free-Syrian-Army-24MAR.pdf>.

⁸⁰ David Wallsh, "Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Impact of Unipolarity," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* Vol. 37:2 (Summer 2013): 115.

the country, and was hoping to take advantage of a possible win-win situation over a mutual enemy. To this end, along with Damascus' condemnation of the attacks, Syrian intelligence cooperated with the US in order to provide information about Al-Qaeda. Accordingly, by early 2002, Syria was seen "as one of the C.I.A.'s most effective intelligence allies in the fight against Al-Qaeda, providing an outpouring of information."⁸¹ This point perfectly fits with Walt's assumption that bandwagoning "increases resources available to threatening power and requires placing trust in its continued forbearance" while intentions may change anytime.⁸² And in line with this understanding, as expected, this cooperation would not last long due to the opposition of Al-Assad against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and this pushed Damascus much closer to its only long-term ally in the region, Tehran.

Following the Iraqi invasion, Washington warned Syrian officials not to take any steps that might danger the US forces in the country. Besides, Secretary of State, Powell pushed Syria to close the Damascus offices of Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas along with dismantling Hezbollah's militia in southern Lebanon. However, as Damascus was disregardful of these calls, a US special operations unit in Iraq crossed the border of Syria in pursuit of a convoy that was told to be carrying Iraqi political elite members. As a result of this incident, number of Syrian civilians were dead and Syrian troops were injured; Syria, despite not making any statements regarding the issue, stopped the intelligence sharing with Washington as a response.⁸³

From the Iranian point of view, following the Islamic Revolution, the US was seen as a

⁸¹ Seymour Hersh, "The Syrian Bet," *The New Yorker* (July 28, 2003), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/07/28/the-syrian-bet>.

⁸² Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 29.

⁸³ Fred H. Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria* (Library of Congress: 2013): 156.

far enemy which was present in the arena with its regional alliances with Iraq (until 1991), Turkey and Saudi Arabia. After 9/11 events in 2001, with its direct presence in the region, the US became one of the main concerns of Iranian foreign policy, and vice versa. Since Iran was seen as one of the main supporters of terrorism, Iran came to the forefront in terms of Bush's "war on terror" concept. What is more, after the US invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), elimination of Taliban and Saddam Hussein regimes, Iran became the focal point of the US' security concerns as Tehran was seeking to accelerate its power and influence in these two countries.⁸⁴ Therefore, Iran was named as part of the Axis of Evil along with North Korea and Iraq in 2002.⁸⁵ Additionally, Iran was one of the main countries mentioned among the US' security concerns along with Syria, and it was named as the "greatest challenge" against Washington.⁸⁶

All these developments following 9/11 events increased the tendency to react against perceived threats by both Iran and Syria. Especially for Iran, new roles and threats also emerged such as being a balancing force in regional crisis like in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon, and being in the middle of two major global terrorism bases of Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸⁷ The increasing international isolationist policies towards Tehran along with Damascus, and the events following 9/11 encouraged them to strengthen their alliance. The changing status quo brought about the need for Iran along with Syria to strengthen their relations with benign governments and factions, and to have an active presence in

⁸⁴ Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 71.

⁸⁵ George W. Bush, *State of the Union Address* (January 29, 2002), <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-4540>.

⁸⁶ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington: The White House, March 2006): 20.

⁸⁷ Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy towards Iraq and Syria," 2.

regional politics.⁸⁸ In this case, the importance of regional allies such as Iran (for Syria), Syria (for Iran), Hezbollah and Hamas has increased. Therefore, as one of the main aims of balancing is preventing stronger states from dominating them, and “to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a threat,”⁸⁹ Damascus and Tehran continued their alliance aiming at deterring the US and Israeli military threat as well as preventing the institutionalization of a US role in the region.

In line with this alliance cooperation, Iran made moves to motivate the cooperation with Syria and signed a bilateral industrial cooperation agreement in April 2002 as well as setting up a fifty-million-dollar to finance joint ventures with Syrian manufacturers. Following that, in the same year, an Iranian industrialist delegation visited Syria to discuss wide range of investments. Then Minister of Security, Ali Yunesi, paid a visit to Damascus to discuss Iranian government’s stance towards the future of Iraq with Bashar Al-Assad.⁹⁰ With all these efforts, the alliance maintained its strength and importance for both Tehran and Damascus.

3.2. 2003 Iraq War

In the first three months of the year 2003, the US was preparing to invade Iraq “to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein's support for terrorism, and to free the Iraqi people.”⁹¹ Before and after the invasion, Syria and Iran boosted their cooperation and renewed their diplomatic engagement. Right before the war started, the two countries held a meeting between their news agency directors in

⁸⁸ Kayhan Barzegar, “Regionalism in Iran’s Foreign Policy,” 2.

⁸⁹ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*: 18.

⁹⁰ Fred. H. Lawson, “Syria’s Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 61 No.1, (2007): 36.

⁹¹ “President Discusses Beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom” *President's Radio Address*, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030322.html>.

Tehran for coordination of discussions against the US and Zionist threats targeting the Arab and Muslim world. Thereinafter, Syrian Foreign Minister Al-Shara and Iranian President Khatami made a meeting to discuss the precautions to take against a possible outbreak of a war in the region and how to prevent it.⁹²

On March 20, 2003, US-led forces invaded Iraq. It was a good development for both as their long-time enemy was defeated; yet on the other side, the speed of the military victory was worrisome since they could have been the next targets in “war on terror.” On 1 May 2003, Bush gave a speech announcing the end of major combat operations in the Iraq war; however, after the invasion conflicts between the US-led forces and Iraqi insurgents continued.⁹³ Therefore, in the end, as Washington faced major difficulties, and came to a dead end in Iraq, both Damascus and Tehran felt relieved.⁹⁴ It was not in the interest of neither countries to see an Iraq drawn into chaos and anarchy; however, in response to hostility of the US towards Iran and Syria, they wanted and made effort to keep some degree of resistance in Iraq so that American forces got immobilized and Washington’s attention was deflected away from them.⁹⁵ In this respect, as their relations with the US remained strained despite Syria’s bandwagoning tendency before the Iraqi crisis, Syria and Iran had to continue their alliance as a commitment for mutual support against this external actor as it is put by Walt.⁹⁶

⁹² Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, 48-48.

⁹³ Dana Bash, “White House pressed on ‘mission accomplished’ sign,” *CNN International*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/10/28/mission.accomplished/>; Jarret Murphy, Text Of Bush Speech, CBSNEWS, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/text-of-bush-speech-01-05-2003/>.

⁹⁴ Goodarzi, “Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment,” 48.

⁹⁵ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, 293-294.

⁹⁶ Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” 89.

Right after the fall of Baghdad, Khatami went to Damascus to discuss the situation in Iraq, ways of cooperation between Damascus and Tehran, and liberalization of trade between the two.⁹⁷ Following the invasion, President Al-Assad found adopting a tougher stance against both the US and Israel was the only way to deal with the recent developments. In line with this understanding, Iran agreed with this stance and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei decided that the only way to deal with the American threat was to raise the cost of the US' another regime change attempt in the region. The idea that both countries were facing a common threat and had to maintain a mutual stance against this common threat as well as foreign intervention had become a repeated discourse in the bilateral relations.

A five-year defense pact was concluded between the two countries in February 2004 with the aim of Iran's support for the Syrian defense against "the Zionist entity" and it was declared that its "arrangements" were also extended to Lebanon. The pact had three sections as strategic partnership on military and intelligence issues, technical and scientific cooperation, and assistance for each other against aggression by a third party. After signing the pact pointing out to the significance of the alliance, Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani said, "In the existing strategic configuration in our region, Syria represents Iran's first line of defense...Iran, in turn, must be regarded as Syria's geo-strategic depth."⁹⁸

The US-led invasion of Iraq led to strengthening of cooperation between the two powers as Syria and Iran viewed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by American forces in April 2003 with ambivalence. Furthermore, American occupation of Iraq in 2003 following 9/11 events increased the security concerns of Tehran and Damascus as American

⁹⁷ Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013): 47-48.

⁹⁸ Amir Taheri, "An Axis Resurgent," *The New York Post* (28 February 2004) <http://www.ar15.com/archive/topic.html?b=1&f=63&t=231161>.

presence in Iraq and Afghanistan was perceived as a threat to national interests and security of Iran.⁹⁹ And with the involvement of Iran in the militant insurgency in post-Saddam Iraq, American leaders started to accuse neighboring Syria and Iran, claiming that they turned a blind eye to the insurgents' cross-border movements as well as assisting and training them. And over time, these claims appeared to be taken seriously by other countries as well.¹⁰⁰

Invasion of Iraq bolstered the Syrian-Iranian cooperation totally against the US' interests, while the American and Iraqi authorities were accusing them of aiding the Iraqi insurgents and aiding flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. This cooperation was a clear example of balancing as it has been so in many other cases. To this end, in order to lead the US to a dead end and make it unable to put military pressure on themselves, Iran and Syria made efforts to strengthen the insurgency in Iraq.¹⁰¹ Syria let the Arab, Sunni Muslim fighters and Al-Qaeda to pass from Syrian territory to Iraq. In the same way, Iran kept close ties with major Iraqi political parties and militias (especially the Shia ones) to guarantee that the new government in Baghdad would not take a negative stance towards itself. Although both did not favor anarchy and civil war in Iraq, they preferred uncertainty to remain so that US-led forces would be pressurized and attentions would be diverted away from them.

On the other hand, both countries tried to conciliate with the new Iraq. Since Iraq's being subordinate to the US would be detrimental for national security of Iran and Syria, an "independent" government would be much preferable to be able to establish good

⁹⁹ Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2010): 173.

¹⁰⁰ Roger Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America* (I.B. Tauris: London and New York, 2007): 23.

¹⁰¹ Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," *World Politics* 61(1): 91; Micheal Slackman, "Wary of US, Syria and Iran Strengthen Ties," *New York Times* (25 June 2006), http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/25/world/middleeast/25syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

relations. For this purpose, apart from making a workshop on Opportunities for Iran and Iraq Economic Cooperation, Iran also established an Office for Iraq's Reconstruction as well as authorizing a 300 million US dollars for reconstruction projects in Iraq. Damascus, at the same time, had also similar efforts to revive the relations by welcoming official delegations and ministers from Iraq.¹⁰²

All these moves followed by the efforts to give momentum to Syrian-Iranian relations, and in May 2003, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the possibility of creating a free trade area. They also formed a Syrian-Iranian parliamentary friendship society, and Iranian and Syrian Speakers of Parliament signed a memorandum of understanding to increase the coordination in April 2004. Following this, in July 2004, Al-Assad made a surprise visit to Iran with his Vice President and Foreign Minister which was reciprocated by President Khatami and his Foreign Minister in October 2004.¹⁰³ What is more, Vice President Abdalhalim Khaddam paid a visit to Iran in September to discuss possible common policies towards Iraq with Rafsanjani, Khatami and Ali Khamanei. Discussions on economic projects had also continued during this period. After a couple of official meetings, they announced the plans for establishing a high committee for the promotion of bilateral trade and investment in September 2004. Starting from 2005 elections for Iraqi Transitional Government, Iranian engagement in Iraq accelerated. Prime Minister Muhammad Naji Al-Utri visited Tehran and the Prime Minister and Iranian Vice President Muhammad Reza Aref announced that both countries concluded a mutual defense pact. However later Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi's rejection of any kind of formal agreement showed that the pact was initiated by Syrian officials.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Fred H. Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria* (Library of Congress Cataloging, 2013): 131.

¹⁰³ Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, 48-49.

¹⁰⁴ Fred H. Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria* (Library of Congress Cataloging, 2013): 132-133.

The US, with the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003,¹⁰⁵ called on Damascus to “halt Syrian support for terrorism, end its occupation of Lebanon, and stop its development of weapons of mass destruction” as well as ceasing “illegal imports and transshipments of Iraqi oil.”¹⁰⁶ This move perceived to be an indirect US maneuver to undermine nuclear program of Iran as well as bolstering a regime change in Syria which would prevent the emergence of an anti-American and anti-Israeli axis.¹⁰⁷ Yet, this tactic could not be successful. In response, Damascus, instead of bending to the demands of Washington, started assisting militants with arms and allowed them to freely cross into Iraq to curb the influence of the US¹⁰⁸ As the US increased its pressure on Syria and condemned it loudly, Iran responded with promises to assist Syria against the effects of US sanctions. Mohsen Mirdamadi, Head of the Iran's Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, said, “Iran is ready to extend assistance to Syria in all fields, especially the oil sector.”¹⁰⁹ According to Roger Howard, in case of imposition of such sanctions on Syria, Iranians could have substituted the losses along with supplying oil to bridge the gap between supply and demand in Syria.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA) is a bill of the United States Congress passed into law on December 12, 2003. The Act's purpose was to end Syrian support for terrorism, Syria's presence in Lebanon, Syria's alleged development of WMDs, Syria's illegal importation of Iraqi oil and illegal shipments of military items to anti-US forces in Iraq. For more information: “Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act Of 2003,” *Public Law* 108–175 (12 December 2003), http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/syria_accountability.pdf.

¹⁰⁶ Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, *Public Law 108-175*, 108th Congress, (12 December 2003).

¹⁰⁷ Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America*, 145.

¹⁰⁸ Bassel F. Salloukh, “Demystifying Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Asad,” in Fred H. Lawson, *Demystifying Syria*, (London: SAQI, 2009): 165

¹⁰⁹ “Iran Promises to Aid Syria against Possible Sanctions,” *Oil & Gas Journal* (11 March 2003).

¹¹⁰ Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America*, 146.

Since the beginning of the occupation of Iraq, Syria and Iran made many meetings with the effort to coordinate their policies on the US policy in the Middle East and the situation in Iraq. While on a visit to Iran in February 2005, the Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Naji Al-Utri declared that the two countries were presenting a ‘united front’ against the challenges they faced in the region. As Jubin Goodarzi also states, some factions of the regime in Tehran gave material and financial support to the radical Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr and his followers in order to corner US-led coalition forces in Baghdad and southern Iraq.¹¹¹ Syrian government left the direct support, although it was giving aid and abetting the passage of Sunni Arab and Muslim volunteers from Syria to Iraq before and during the Iraqi invasion. In order to prevent Syria and Iran from aiding the insurgency, Bush administration imposed economic sanctions on Syria in 2003, and after the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, put serious pressures on Syria which led its troops to withdraw from Lebanon. At the same time, the US brought Iran’s nuclear activities to international attention with an effort of international isolation of Tehran. What is more, it was known that Kurdish Iranian separatists were supplied with arms from Iraq by Washington to engage Iranian security forces in the border regions.

Iran’s increasing influence in Iraq, and therefore, loss of an ally against Persian expansionism alarmed Saudi Arabia as well as it was the greatest strategic setback for Saudi Arabia in decades. In response, Saudi Arabia and its allies found a chance in Lebanon to weaken Iran, Syria and Hezbollah right after the February 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri who was a close ally of Saudi Arabia. This gave birth to the “Cedar Revolution” that demanded withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Although usually the main opposition against Syria in Lebanon was coming from Christians, Sunnis with the support of Saudi Arabia was also at the forefront against Syria while Hezbollah and Iran was in full support of Syria. Thus, it became a

¹¹¹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, 293.

proxy war of Iran and Saudi Arabia. In the end, with the effect of international pressures, Syria had to withdraw its 18,000 troops and intelligence officers from Lebanon in April 2005. This withdrawal as well as allegations that Syria and Hezbollah masterminded the assassination of Hariri and the UN's investigation perceived as an isolation and "humiliation" had been a motive for Al-Assad to get closer to Hezbollah and Iran and deepen their defensive alliance.¹¹²

Syrian-Iranian interests merged in another way as well. Syria and Iran both favored the instability and insurgency in Iraq unless they could dominate the country; however, both countries would not be willing to see each other's monopoly on influence in Iraq. It was obvious when Syria tried to make more moves to conciliate with Iraq each time Iran made efforts in Iraq while also trying to keep warm bonds with Tehran. It also became more apparent with Syria's support to some Sunni factions during the war in order to contain spread of Iranian influence. Yet, in the end, the two countries even though supporting different factions managed to reconcile in regards to their strategic concerns. Therefore, instead of absolute influence of one of them, an Iran-Syria-Iraq alignment seemed much more favorable for both allies as Iraq which is far from being a moderate pro-Western state could be used by a bargaining chip for both countries.¹¹³

3.3. 2006 Lebanon War

Syria had been an occupying power in Lebanon since 1976 the end of Lebanese Civil War till April 2005. During these years, Damascus extended its control over presidency, judiciary and security forces in the country. The reactions and opposition against Syria's presence in Lebanon accelerated after inauguration of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria and

¹¹² Mohsen Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," *The Washington Quarterly* 36:4 (Fall 2013): 83, <https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/24384/uploads>.

¹¹³ Barry Rubin, "Iran's Nuclear and Syria's Iraq Adventures," *GLORIA Center*, Volume 11, No. 4 (December 2007): 8, 12.

these reactions reached to its peak point in 2003. As a reaction against Syrian activities in Iraq, the US started to criticize Syrian occupation of Lebanon which was followed by the criticisms of France and most of other European powers in 2004 as well as UN Resolution calling for constitutional presidential election and withdrawal of all foreign forces.¹¹⁴

Moreover, in 2004 Syria wanted to extend the period of its pro-Lebanese president Emile Lahoud contrary to the Lebanese constitution. However, this was faced with objection from major Christian powers in Lebanon and mainly from the strong Sunni Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and that was a major setback for Syria. The main considerations for Syria were preventing any existential threat to the Baath Party's rule in Damascus, its power in Beirut and securing its geopolitical interests. Until 2004, Syria's interests in Lebanon had been warranted through Al-Assad's election of the Lebanese presidential candidates. Syria had strong links to Hezbollah and continued to play a significant role in Lebanese politics as it had virtually controlled politics in Lebanon since 1990 which was interrupted with Hariri's inauguration. However, his assassination in 2005 forced Syria to remove all its troops from Lebanon. This marked a new era of antagonisms between the US, France and "moderate" Arab states like Saudi Arabia against Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas.¹¹⁵

Along with the rising antagonisms with regional and international forces, both leaders' rhetoric emphasizing their continuing alliance and cooperation was also rising the tensions. Following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's inauguration in 2005, Bashar Al-Assad was the first head of state to visit newly elected president. During Al-Assad's visit, Ahmadinejad stated, "Syria represents the front-line of the Muslim nation, shared threats bring us together and make our cooperation even more necessary...Reinforcing our

¹¹⁴ "Lebanon," *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2005/lebanon>.

¹¹⁵ C. Ernest Dawn, "The Foreign Policy of Syria," in L. Carl Brown, *Diplomacy in the Middle East* (Tauris: 2001): 170.

bilateral relations will protect the region against the threats of its enemies... our enemies are trying to undermine this relationship.”¹¹⁶ During this period both countries were in a similar position and still facing the US sanctions for their alleged sponsorship of terrorism and quest for non-conventional weapons while they were accused of playing a spoiling role in their shared neighbor Iraq as well. Ahmadinejad’s anti-Israeli rhetoric which was perceived as a call for wiping off Israel from the map caused increase in criticisms towards Iran, and even the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan cancelled his visit to Iran.¹¹⁷

In the same way, Syria was facing pressures from the UN regarding the murder of Rafiq Hariri either to cooperate on the issue or face a possible international action. In response to all these pressures, Tehran announced its support to Damascus and Ahmadinejad assured that he would visit Syria soon.¹¹⁸ In January 2006 Ahmadinejad, in return to Al-Assad’s visit, paid a visit to Damascus and by highlighting the strength of the relations he indicated that the two countries had identical stances towards economic, cultural and regional issues. Damascus, on the other hand, also showed its approval for Iran’s decision to resume the nuclear research program notwithstanding the international condemnation as well as pleading that the program was peaceful and Iran had the right to develop nuclear energy. In parallel to this stance, Tehran supported the resistance against Israel and backed Syria over the UN’s Hariri assassination inquiry. In this period, development of the relations continued and were reinforced with official visits and meetings.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ “‘Shared Threats’ Bring Syria, Iran Closer,” *Arab News* (8 August 2005), <http://www.arabnews.com/node/271118>.

¹¹⁷ “Annan delays Iran trip after row,” *BBC News*, (4 November 2005), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4408932.stm.

¹¹⁸ Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions*: 119.

¹¹⁹ Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*: 49-50.

Tehran and Damascus signed a military cooperation agreement against the common threats posed by Israel and the US. It was stated by the Syrian Minister that as Iran regards Syrian security as its own, the two countries were seeking for ways to encounter and establish a joint front against American and Israeli threats. Iran also accepted to finance Syrian military deals with Russia, China and Ukraine, to equip Syrian army with cannon, warheads, army vehicles and missiles manufactured by the Iranian Defense Industries, and to enable Syrian navy drills. Thereinafter President Ahmadinejad announced that any attack on Syria would be considered an attack against Iran and would be responded with utmost force.¹²⁰

Meanwhile, Hamas made an attack, which was believed to be organized by Hamas leadership from Damascus, against Israel and abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit on June 25. It was right before the signing of the Prisoners' Document which was moderately recalling the struggle to liberate Palestinian land. Yet the attack a couple of days before the signing of this document was in a way an indicator that Hezbollah external leadership and its allies were afraid that Hamas would be dispossessed of its election victory, soften its ideological doctrine and even recognize Israel. As a result of these attacks and retaliation of Israel by air strikes, 175 people were killed and 620 people were injured in Gaza which could not bring about the release of Gilat Shalit.¹²¹

The zenith of the alliance was reached after the 34-day Israeli–Hezbollah War of 2006. On July 12, 2006, this time another attack showed up with Hezbollah's opening fire at Israeli military positions on the Lebanese-Israeli border. The kidnapping of Gilad Shalit motivated Israel to start a military operation in the Gaza Strip. Israeli Prime Minister

¹²⁰ Ely Karmon, Ph.D., "Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas: A Coalition Against Nature Why Does It Work?" *The Proteus Monograph Series* Volume 1, Issue 5 (May 2008): 57.

¹²¹ Karmon, "Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas: A Coalition Against Nature Why Does It Work?" 57.

Olmert reacted to the incident in Lebanon in the same way and Lebanon War broke out. The war continued until a UN resolution called for ending the war and disarming Hezbollah; however, this resolution could never bring the disarmament. The war lasted 34 days and Israel lost 150 people and 1,500 were wounded whereas there were more than a thousand dead and several thousand wounded people in Lebanon.¹²² This was the first time in that an Arab force did not quickly lost to Israel and even Hezbollah claimed victory and this increased Hezbollah's power and popularity as Iran kept on supplying weapons via Syria.¹²³ In the course of the war, American and Israeli politicians were emphasizing the necessity of weakening Hezbollah's position in Lebanon, indirectly implying Tehran and Damascus.¹²⁴ Syria preferred not to enter into a direct war yet acted as a conduit for weapons along with Iran which sent advanced arms and advisors, and supplied training to bolster the capabilities of Hezbollah.¹²⁵

The US officials were also directly pointing to Syria-Iran involvement and support to Hezbollah. In this manner, while officials asserted that stopping the strikes against Israel was up to two main backers of Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, a top US counterterrorism official also expressed that "Syria can do far more to rein in Hizbollah, such as stopping arms flows into Lebanon, but is not capable of putting the militia "out of business"."¹²⁶ In the meantime, Tehran signed a defense pact with Damascus in 2006 followed by a military agreement in 2007 in addition to Iran's sales of missiles and strengthening of

¹²² Marina Belenkaya, "Analysis: Syria, Iran Won Lebanon War," *RIA Novosti* (28 December 2006).

¹²³ Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)."

¹²⁴ Belenkaya, "Analysis: Syria, Iran Won Lebanon War."

¹²⁵ Mohamad Ali Harissi, "Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Israel, a Smoking Gun?" *People's Daily Online* (9 February 2010); Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy, *Middle East Report* No. 92 (14 December 2009): 9; Barry Rubin, "Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* (September 2006): 6.

¹²⁶ Caroline Drees, "Syria, Iran Lack Full Hizbullah Control: US Official," *Reuters* (25 July 2006).

intelligence exchange with Syria.¹²⁷ Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani was in Damascus on July 12, 2006. One day later, on July 13, Ahmadinejad made a speech and said, “There are also some countries that claim to be democracies and supporters of freedom and human rights but which keep silent when this regime [Israel] bombs Lebanon in front of their eyes and slaughters people in their houses. They keep silent and they support murderers with their silence”¹²⁸ During this period, the Iranian support became more apparent not only by the speeches but also by the posters of Hezbollah Leader Nasrallah, Ahmadinejad and Al-Assad side-by-side seen on the walls and shop windows.¹²⁹

In line with the Iranian stance, Al-Assad in one of his interviews made the following speech:

Iran is a country that has existed in the region from early history, but the Arabs who are absent from the political arena whether in the decision making or in shaping the future of the region...if Iran plays a pivotal role it will fall in the interest of the region...Syria is a secular country and has no problem in cooperating with Iran and the Iranians have no problem in dealing with a pan-Arab state. If one looks to what is happening in Iraq, he will see that the western powers which are propagating secularism, are working to consolidate the non-religious radical current in the Arab world.¹³⁰

Andrew Tabler asserts that during this period, rumors of Iranian takeover in Damascus had been discussed in public places of Lebanon and Jordan based on Israeli and UN

¹²⁷ Mona Yacoubian, “Syria’s Alliance with Iran,” *United States Institute for Peace* (1 May 2007), <http://www.usip.org/publications/syria-s-alliance-iran>.

¹²⁸ Bill Samii, “Iran: Tehran Playing Key Role In Israel-Lebanon Crisis,” *RFERL* (17 July 2006), <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1069890.html>.

¹²⁹ Maltzahn, *The Syrian-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*: 50.

¹³⁰ President Assad Dubai TV Interview (24 August 2006), http://www.presidentassad.net/INTERVIEWS/ASSAD_DUBAI_TV_INTERVIEW.htm.

forces reports revealing that Syria provided Hezbollah with anti-tank weapons to be used against Israel.¹³¹ Some others were also showing millions of dollars of Iranian investments made in Syria as a sign of growing Iranian influence on Syria as well as Iran's being the top investor among non-Arab countries in Syria in 2006.¹³² As Barry Rubin puts it, the conflict in Lebanon "knit Syria and Iran tighter together"¹³³ which became obvious with the rhetoric and actions of the two leaders.

Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, had claimed victory in the end of the war. Hezbollah was weakened; however, it gained popularity and support in Arab-Muslim world. Hezbollah had another victory with the exchange of the bodies of two Israeli servicemen for five Lebanese prisoners and the remains of 199 others in 2008.¹³⁴ In Tehran, Iran organized a celebration for the victory in Lebanon with fireworks. Following the end of the war, Iran maintained its use of the good relations with Syria for the sake of anti-Israeli stance as well as utilizing from the Damascus trips for meeting Hamas Leader Mashaal. Additionally, Iran's emphasis on "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran and Syria and also comprising of Hezbollah and Hamas increased.¹³⁵

In 2008 spring, efforts to reach an agreement between Syria and Israel through indirect talks with the mediation of Turkey restarted which was closely followed by Iran. During this period, Syria reassured Tehran that it would not affect their relations with each other. Syrian officials like Syrian spokesperson Buthaina Sha'ban reiterated that the bilateral

¹³¹ Tabler, *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria*, 167.

¹³² "Iran, Forerunner in Syria investment among non-Arab-states," *IRNA* (24 January 2007), <http://www.souria.com/em/hl/article.asp?at=8180>.

¹³³ Barry Rubin, "Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, (September 2006): 6.

¹³⁴ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment*, 49.

¹³⁵ Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*, 51.

relations were very good and Iran was not worried. One of the Iranian newspapers, Etemaad, on the other hand, published a front-page interview with the Syrian ambassador titled “Syrian ambassador: We won’t sell Iran to Israel.” Reaffirming Iran’s support, it was stated by the Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki that demanding the Golan Heights back was Syria’s right. Yet, the talks did not bring about any positive results or agreements and broke off with Israel’s attack and blockade against Gaza at the beginning of 2009 which were condemned by Syria and Iran.¹³⁶

Hezbollah’s increasing role in Lebanon is seen as a significant indicator of the rise of Syrian-Iranian axis as Hezbollah has been one of the key points of the alliance. Thus, abolishment of the ties between the countries were of serious importance in the eyes of the West, the US and Israel as it would mean for Iran to lose its main route to send logistic, financial and military aid to Hezbollah and therefore its influence in Lebanon. It would also mean encirclement of Hezbollah. Additionally, the West generally saw this alliance as an “unnatural” entity and marriage of convenience emerged as a result of the existence of mutual enemies of Saddam Iraq and Israel as well as international pressure and isolation of the both countries.¹³⁷ In line with this understanding, especially after the collapse of Saddam regime in Iraq which was considered to be the main mutual enemy and one of the reasons of the alliance, the US and its allies followed an engagement policy towards Syria with the hope that it would bring settlement, Damascus would become closer to the West and the alliance would end. In August 2007, Joe Biden told in one of his interviews that while Syria was “Iran's closest ally,” the US “should work to break up its marriage of convenience with Iran.”¹³⁸ In the same way, in 2008, Anthony Lake, a senior advisor to then-Senator Barack Obama, commented that one advantage of

¹³⁶ Maltzahn, *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*: 51.

¹³⁷ Tony Badran, “The Syria-Iran Alliance,” *inFocus Quarterly* Spring 2009, <http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/825/the-syria-iran-alliance>.

¹³⁸ “2008 U.S. Presidential Campaign: Joseph Biden,” Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/Biden.html>.

engaging Syria was “in part to break its unnatural alliance with Iran.” This view was also approved by the date’s United Nations' special envoy to the Middle East, Michael Williams, who stated, “The impression I got from my visit to Damascus was that if there was progress in terms of establishing a peace track, then we would see some changes in Syrian behavior on the three issues, Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas.”¹³⁹ There had been several officials thinking in the same for the engagement of Syria and its consequences.¹⁴⁰

Following Obama’s inauguration, an ambassador was appointed and high rank US officials visited Damascus for the first time after 4 years while the sanctions remained as it was believed that Syria continued its support to terrorism. The US also encouraged Syria to develop its relations with Turkey with the hope that it would move away from Tehran. Yet all these proved useless as the negotiations with Israel stopped with Gaza War which started on December 27, 2008. As a response to all these efforts, Iranian President Ahmadinejad, during his February 2010 Damascus visit, criticized the engagement policy and asked the US to leave the region and not to get involved in the regional issues. At a mutual press conference with Al-Assad, Ahmadinejad declared that the US saw Syria and Iran as obstacles while trying to have dominance in the Middle East.¹⁴¹ This mentality played an important role in Iran’s stance during Syrian uprisings as Tehran saw the unrest as a tool of super powers to overcome Syrian obstacle and destroy the Damascus-Tehran axis to reach their imperialist plans in the region.

January 2011 witnessed the Hezbollah-led collapse of Saad Hariri’s government following his refusal to terminate cooperation with the UN-backed Special Tribunal for

¹³⁹ Kaveh L Afrasiabi, "Iran-Syria alliance on uncertain ground," *Asia Times Online* Middle East (21 July 2007), http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/IG21Ak03.html.

¹⁴⁰ For more information, Tony Badran, “The Syria-Iran Alliance,” *inFocus* Volume III No. 1 (Spring 2009), <http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/825/the-syria-iran-alliance>; Mohammad Tabaar, "Analysis: Breaking the Syria-Iran alliance," *BBC World Service* (Washington DC, 26 August 2006) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5263800.stm; Dr. Bayram Sinkaya, “İran-Suriye İlişkileri ve Suriye’de Halk İsyanı,” *Ortadoğu Analiz* Cilt: 3 Sayı: 33 (Eylül 2011).

¹⁴¹ Sinkaya, “İran-Suriye İlişkileri ve Suriye’de Halk İsyanı,” 43.

Lebanon investigating the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Hezbollah condemned UN Tribunal's accusations and arrest warrants against its four members for the murder of Hariri in August 2011. Atmosphere in Lebanon got more polarized following these events added to Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime since the beginning of Syrian uprisings. Hezbollah gets isolated both at home and abroad; however, it still receives support from Iran and Syria.¹⁴²

3.4. Chapter Conclusion with Theoretical Analysis

With the beginning of 2000s, the changing international and regional system made continuation of Syrian-Iranian alliance inevitable. As the threat perceptions of both countries significantly matched with the increasing isolation and rise in the possibility of dominance of US power, and thus increasing security concerns brought the two powers much closer. Walt, with the understanding of "balance of threat," claims that states react to threats, not to power and states also attempt to prevent a potential hegemon by balancing against it.¹⁴³ The accuracy of Walt's theory can be seen in the reinforcement of Iran and Syria's alliance with the possibility of increasing US involvement in the region because both perceived this as threatening to national and regional interests.

The changing regional status quo increased the importance of the partnership between each other for both countries. After a short period of bandwagoning with the US for Syria, with the changing regional dynamics and interests, Syria and Iran's alliance politics in this period was again based on balancing the US influence in the region. As one of the main aims of balancing is preventing stronger states from dominating them, and "to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose

¹⁴² Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment*, 49.

¹⁴³ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 118-121.

a threat,”¹⁴⁴ Damascus and Tehran continued their alliance aiming at deterring the US and Israeli military threat as well as preventing the institutionalization of a US role in the region. Antipathy against the West and Israel seems to bring Iran as a natural ally for Syria and it has already strategic ties with Iran. Iran, on the hand, as it perceived the US as one of the major threats, preferred to form an alliance against the US, as well. Geographic proximity of the enemy increased with the deployment of US troops to Iraq. Also, as the US’ one of the main aims was a regime change in Iraq, it was feared that then Iran and Syria would be on the list and they would be the second Iraq. Although the Bush administration’s policies somehow isolated the two countries from the international realm, the invasion of Iraq coupled with the isolation efforts did nothing but strengthened Syrian-Iran ties.

Tehran’s interests in Palestine and Lebanon were perfectly compatible with its interests in Syria. During his visits to Syria, Ahmadinejad did not neglect to meet with leaders from Palestinian groups of Islamic Jihad and Hamas as well as Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁴⁵ Tehran’s aid gained from oil money was of significant importance as these groups were lacking other financial sources. Damascus was the bridge for Iran to have access to these groups. Additionally, Syria was also in need of the aid from Iran especially after Hariri assassination which brought withdrawal of Egyptian and Saudi Arabian support.¹⁴⁶ What is more, the US blockade on both countries made economic cooperation indispensable for both countries as it served for mutual interests. Syria was in economic liberalization and making privatization efforts. It could have been an opportunity for the US and Europe to use this as a leverage to spoil the Damascus-Tehran relationship; however, American exports and investments to Syria were prohibited due to Washington’s imposition of sanctions in 2004 as punishment for supporting militant Palestinian and

¹⁴⁴ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 18.

¹⁴⁵ Maaikje Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy During Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions*, 119.

¹⁴⁶ Lara Marlowe, “Syria and Iran take a stand against US and the West,” *The Irish Times* (21 January 2006), <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/syria-and-iran-take-a-stand-against-us-and-the-west-1.1004531>.

Lebanese organizations. In the same way, Iran was the subject of two recent rounds of UN sanctions for its possible nuclear weapons ambitions and a thirty-year boycott by the US, did not have much investment opportunities. Therefore, it was almost inevitable for these two countries to deepen their alliance.

If the alliance was a short time alliance which sought for periodic opportunities, then it would be dissolved once the Saddam regime was overthrown. However, as known, the alliance has been continuing since 2003. The efforts to break up this alliance, especially used by the US not only proved ineffective, but also had an opposite effect of making the two allies come closer to each other. In this respect, as their relations with the US remained strained, Syria and Iran had to continue their alliance as a commitment for mutual support against this external actor as it is put by Walt.¹⁴⁷ In the years following the invasion, there had been a significant increase in the bilateral relations in political, economic and cultural levels with shared threat perceptions and compatible political goals. Threat perceptions of both countries remained close to each other with the help of increasing international pressures and changing regional environment. Compatibility of the two powers' interests also cemented the relationship.

While sharing the same aim of maintaining instability and insurgency in Iraq unless they could dominate the country, both Tehran and Damascus were wary of the other's having monopoly over the influence in Iraq. Thus, in order to keep the equilibrium, both Iran and Syria made moves to conciliate with Iraq while not neglecting efforts to keep warm bonds with each other. To this end, Syria even supported some Sunni factions during the war to be able to contain spread of Iranian influence. In this regard, as discussed at the beginning of this thesis, it can be said that similar ideologies and goals may sometimes cause divergence within the alliance as it brings about a competitive factor to the alliance. As indicated by many scholars, ideology may bring division rather than unity and could pose an obstacle against alliances sometimes. The two powers' seeking for

¹⁴⁷ Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World:" 89.

influence could have caused such a division; however, as the alliance was crucial both for Damascus and Tehran in order to be able to keep the balance of power stable and appease the threats, they successfully managed to reach reconciliation and maintain the alliance.

The alliance was instrumental to increase the resistance in Lebanon. Regarding Syria, it strengthened Al-Assad's hand by fostering the relations with Lebanon which helped to formalize a Lebanon in line with Syria's interests. On the other hand, this alliance helped Iran to challenge the West in Lebanon. In this way the alliance made things easier for the two countries. Additionally, in this period there was a balanced level of dependency between the two countries which also helped to strengthen and balance the relations between Damascus and Tehran.

CHAPTER 4

SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS SINCE THE SYRIAN UPRISINGS

Until 2011, Syria and Iran maintained very cordial relations. In 2006, a military cooperation agreement was signed between the two countries and in August 2010 they signed a free trade agreement. Trade relations were about \$350 million in 2010; moreover, the aim was to further increase the bilateral trade relations to \$5 billion in the future.¹⁴⁸ Syria at the same time reiterated its support for Iran's nuclear energy program.¹⁴⁹

On the other side, by late 2009, Washington started to make efforts to turn a new page with Syria. The aim was moving Al-Assad away from Iran via a peace treaty which would get him back to negotiation table. On February 24, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the US was urging Syria to stop arming Hezbollah as well as to move away from ally Iran, cooperate in Iraq and resume peace talks with Israel.¹⁵⁰ In response to this call, Al-Assad invited Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah to Damascus. In his speech, Al-Assad said, "We must have understood Clinton wrong because of bad translation or our limited understanding, so we signed the agreement to cancel visas...I find it strange that [Americans] talk about Middle East stability and peace and the other beautiful principles and call for two countries to move away from each other." In addition to that, Ahmadinejad also stated, "Clinton said we should maintain a distance. I say there is no distance between Iran and Syria...We have the same goals, same interests and same

¹⁴⁸ "Iran, Syria Should Prepare Economic Cooperation Roadmap: Minister," *Tehran Times* (11 August 2010).

¹⁴⁹ Fred. H. Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 61 No.1, (2007): 42.

¹⁵⁰ Lachlan Carmichael, "Clinton presses Syria to abandon Iran, halt Hizbullah arms," *The Daily Star* (25 February 2010), <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/Feb/25/Clinton-presses-Syria-to-abandon-Iran-halt-Hizbullah-arms.ashx#ixzz1rzwLbw00>.

enemies. Our circle of cooperation is expanding day after day.”¹⁵¹ At the same time, there were news reports revealing that Syria was transferring advanced weaponry to Hezbollah.¹⁵² In response to the US allegations on Syria’s arming Hezbollah, Iranian Vice President Muhammad Rida Rahimi warned that Tehran would “stand alongside Syria against any threat” and “cut off Israel’s feet if they made an assault against Syria. In the meantime, the two states established a joint Syrian-Iranian bank capitalized at 30 million US dollars while a month later Iran provided Syria with a sophisticated radar system.”¹⁵³

Right after these developments along with unrests in the region, popular uprisings erupted in Syria as well. When popular unrest started in Syria in March 2011, Iran stood behind Al-Assad regime. During his visit to Tehran on March 11, Syrian Prime Minister Al-Utri was told by Ahmadinejad that “the two countries should smartly take further steps to expand their relations and co-operation, especially in the economic and social arenas”¹⁵⁴ and five new pacts on trade and housing were signed. It seemed that Iranian support for Syria would continue even after the start of the uprisings. In this regard, the ongoing events in the Syrian uprisings and its effects to the alliance will be examined in this chapter.

4.1. Syrian Uprisings

In 2011, Syrian government also started to witness uprisings against its authority like

¹⁵¹ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Syria and Iran Defy Clinton in Show off Unity,” *Reuters* (25 February 2010), http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/2/26/worldupdates/2010-02-25T201417Z_01_NOOTR_RTRMDNC_0_-464759-1&sec=Worldupdates.

¹⁵² Tabler, *In the Lion’s Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington’s Battle with Syria*: 226-229; Charles Levinson and Jay Solomon, “Syria Gave Scuds to Hezbollah, US Says,” *The Wall Street Journal* (16 April 2010) <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304604204575182290135333282.html>.

¹⁵³ Fred H. Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria*: 139.

¹⁵⁴ Fred H. Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria*: 141.

many other countries of the region. When the Arab uprisings first started in 2010-2011 in Tunisia, Iran declared its support for the demonstrations as they were seen as a challenge against pro-Western regimes. Seeing these opposition movements as Islamist, Tehran evaluated them as triggering point of a new pan-Islamic era in the Middle East and North Africa. Iran hoped that the Arab Spring, so called “Islamic Awakening,” would bring about the end of US-backed autocracies and beginning of a Muslim unity era to defeat the West and Israel. Khamenei made this understanding clear with his statements, “Our stance is clear: wherever a movement is Islamic, popular and anti-American, we support it...If somewhere a movement is provoked by America and Zionists [indirectly referring to Syria here], we will not support it. Wherever America and the Zionists enter the scene to topple a regime and occupy a country, we are on the opposite side.”¹⁵⁵

However, this view all of a sudden changed with the uprisings in Syria. If Assad regime fell, there was no guarantee that if the new government would like to keep and even strengthen the ties with its longstanding ally Iran. At the beginning, Syrian uprising was seen totally harmful and Iranian state media remained silent about the issue. Then as it became impossible to ignore, they tried to serve it as a foreign plot. It was obvious that this particular case was critical for Tehran as it was a sign for a potential fall of its sustained ally Syria and more broadly its regional standing especially its ties with Hezbollah which has a significant importance in terms of its foreign policy and security strategies. Therefore, Iran showed support for the existing regime in Syria. The support was to the extent that some analysts even believe that the Syrian regime would have collapsed long ago without the help of Iran.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Robin Pomeroy, “Analysis: Iran sees ally Syria surrounded by US, Arab “wolves”,” *Reuters* (15 August 2011), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/15/us-syria-iran-idUSTRE77E1E320110815#itfv9Xicy0iCKzSv.97>.

¹⁵⁶ Naame Shaam, “Iran in Syria: From an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force,” *Letter From Syria* 1st Edition (September 2014): 6, http://www.naameshaam.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/report_iran_in_syria_201411.pdf.

In line with Tehran's understanding, the Iranian state media reports of that time revealed three main narratives. The first one was based on blaming Israel and the US. The second argument was emphasizing the role of Saudis and other Gulf states, especially the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera news agency, in encouraging the separation in Syria like the 2009 post-election unrest in Iran. Third narrative focused on Sunni-led Lebanese contribution, mainly led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri who was backed by Saudis. They all resembled Tehran's efforts to blame its own opposition of being foreign enemy's proxy. Yet in the case of Syria, in addition to Western powers, Arab adversaries also came to the scene as the ones seeking to destabilize Damascus.¹⁵⁷

Tehran with an effort to help Damascus get out of the crisis, provided technical support, advice, equipment and expertise to defeat the opposition. Specialist personnel and units from the Iranian security apparatus, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) elite Quds Force, police and intelligence were also dispatched and deployed in Syria to assist in defeating armed opposition fighters from the Free Syrian Army and foreign Sunni Islamist groups.¹⁵⁸ With the beginning of the Syrian revolution, relationships between the two countries turned into sole dependency and dominance rather than a mutually beneficial partnership as it was interchangeably used to be. The Syrian regime would not be able to suppress the ongoing protests without the help of Iran.¹⁵⁹ Iran facilitated the crackdown of Bashar Al-Assad's regime on the Syrian

¹⁵⁷ Babak Rahimi, "Special Commentary: Iranian Reaction to the Great Syrian Revolt," The Jamestown Foundation, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37834&cHash=75eb01045ca344749cddb8653d0a5d#.Vm0udfn-3ow.

¹⁵⁸ For details, see David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press): 128; Ian Black, "Iran Confirms It Has Forces in Syria and Will Take Military Action If Pushed," *The Guardian* (16 September 2012), and Con Coughlin, "Iran Sends Elite Troops to Aid Bashar al-Assad Regime in Syria," *The Daily Telegraph* (6 September 2012).

¹⁵⁹ Shaam, "Iran in Syria: From an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force," *Letter From Syria* 1st Edition, (September 2014): 6, http://www.naameshaam.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/report_iran_in_syria_201411.pdf.

population by agreeing to fund the construction of a Syrian military base which would make the arms and military hardware shipments to Syria from IRGC easier while Iraq also devoted 10 billion US dollars for assisting Al-Assad with the pressure of Iran.¹⁶⁰

As part of the support of Iranian government to Bashar Al-Assad throughout the uprisings, Iranian officials labeled the rebellions in Syria as a foreign conspiracy while reiterating their support for the reforms to be made by the current government which was seen as a key for its survival.¹⁶¹ Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi advised the Syrian government to respond to public demands and welcomed Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's promises for reform by stating, "If the majority of people in Syria have legitimate demands, it is the duty of the Bashar Al-Assad government to respond to those demands as it has done so (thus far) and has fulfilled its promises to improve the situation." However, he emphasized that a differentiation should be made between popular uprisings and the movements that are being made in certain countries, such as Syria, with the aim of exploiting the situation unfolding in the Arab world.¹⁶² Iran, as it did not favor a regime change in this country, avoided making harsh criticisms towards the current regime as well as indirectly supporting it. Therefore, Iran's calling for reforms could not be seen as a sign abandonment; rather it was an effort to save the regime and its alliance. On the other hand, Iran believed that there were also malign groups included in the opposition such as Salafists which claimed to fight against Al-Assad regime for so long as well as taking part in Muslim Brotherhood, and the opposition taking support from foreign powers against Al-Assad regime.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria*: 142.

¹⁶¹ Firas Abu Hilal, "Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Positions and Rpercussions," *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* (Doha: September 2011): 7-8.

¹⁶² "Iran says expects Syria to respond to public demands," *Tehran Times* (7 July 2011), http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=243724.

¹⁶³ Sinkaya, "İran-Suriye İlişkileri ve Suriye'de Halk İsyanı:" 45.

Iran's support was also clear from the words of Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi, "Syria is managing this situation very well on its own. But if the government can't solve the crisis on its own, then, based on their request, we will fulfill our mutual defense-security pact."¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, Saeed Jalili, Head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council made emphasis on Iran's role in managing the crisis with his words, "What is happening in Syria is not an internal issue, but a conflict between the axis of resistance and its enemies in the region and the world. Iran will not tolerate, in any form, the breaking of the axis of resistance, of which Syria is an intrinsic part."¹⁶⁵

The uprisings have not remained local and it started to have regional and international dimensions with the indirect inclusion of many actors as Turkey, Gulf States and Saudi Arabia supporting the opposition while Iran, Hezbollah and Iraq providing support to Assad regime. Additionally, the US and EU made efforts to put pressure and isolate the Assad regime. China and Russia, on the other hand especially in the UN Security Council, blocked efforts to penalize Assad regime and make military intervention to support Syrian opposition.

In the midst of the year 2011, Iranian leadership started to recalculate its policies as the Syrian uprisings seemed not coming to an end. As a precaution, Iran tried to approach some opposition groups (such as Muslim Brotherhood in Syria) in Syria regarding their stances on Iran, Israel, Lebanon and the US; yet, they could not reach any concrete results.¹⁶⁶ Thereinafter, Iran provided full arms, oil and financial support to Assad regime.¹⁶⁷ Due to the international sanctions on Syria, Damascus became unable to sell

¹⁶⁴ Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Said to Send Troops to Bolster Syria," *The Wall Street Journal* (27 August 2012), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

¹⁶⁵ Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment:" 33.

¹⁶⁶ Jubin Goodarzi, "Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?" *Wilson Center Middle East Program Viewpoints No. 35* (August 2013): 3.

¹⁶⁷ Lina Saigol, "Iran Helps Syria Defy Oil Embargo," *The Financial Times* (18 May 2012).

its oil; therefore, Iranian oil companies found out secret ways to market the Syrian petroleum.¹⁶⁸ In the meantime, Kofi Annan and then Lakhdar Brahimi were appointed by the UN and Arab League as special envoys to mediate and resolve the Syrian conflict in 2012. Tehran, glad with these developments, wanted to join these multilateral initiatives hoping that it could play a role in determining political situation in Syria after the end of the crisis. Iran participated in talks with Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in September 2012; however, the US along with its allies made efforts to keep Tehran away from the negotiation table.

During these years, Syria was regionally left alone. Turkey, despite supporting Assad regime and asking it to make reform to appease the people, later got exhausted with the ongoing violence and its effects to Turkey's border cities. There had been a change in Prime Minister Erdoğan's rhetoric towards the regime and even Syrian ambassador was expelled. This was followed by Syrian gunners' shooting down a Turkish RF-4E Phantom plane along with firing a rescue aircraft searching for the downed plane along with many other tense developments. Accordingly Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared that any military element approaching from Syria to Turkish borders will be assessed as a military threat and target due to security risk and danger. After all these, tensions escalated between the two countries with bombings as well as increasing flow of Syrian refugees to Turkey.¹⁶⁹

Besides Turkey, Iraq started to abandon its moderate stance and Foreign Minister Hushyar Zibari stated that Iraq could no longer remain neutral to the conflict in Syria and the Minister even told a group of Syrian opposition figures that Assad regime should be held responsible for killing of people and destruction of the cities. However, in contrast to Turkey, Iraq was giving mixed messages as Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki

¹⁶⁸ Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria*: 144.

¹⁶⁹ Lawson, *Global Security Watch: Syria* (Library of Congress: 2013): 143-144.

was emphasizing Iraq's neutral policies towards the Syrian crisis while Iraqi Minister of Transportation Hadi Al-Amiri was also threatening Turkey and the Gulf States in case of a threat against Syria by saying that Iraq would not stand still against such a threat from these countries.¹⁷⁰ Yet due to these mixed messages, Iraq was also no longer a dependable friend for Syria in the region. And all these along with the international sanctions brought about Iran as the only remaining partner in the region for Syria.

Iran backed Assad regime by believing that a weakening Syria would create an advantage for Israel. Thus, the resistance against Israel –through Hamas and Hezbollah as well– made it obligatory to support the current regime in Syria. In line with this understanding, it was believed that all campaigns against it was aiming at destabilization and debilitation of the country as well as weakening its anti-Israeli stance. In the meantime, the popularity of Iran and Hezbollah rapidly declined in the Arab-Muslim world following their unwavering support for the Assad regime in its efforts for suppressing the Syrian uprisings. On the other side, while Hezbollah and Iran supported the Syrian government, Hamas sided by the Syrian rebels. Therefore, the relations between Tehran and Hamas became strained by the winter of 2011-2012 as Khaled Mashal, the leader of the movement, left Damascus and declared his support for the Syrian opposition.¹⁷¹

Starting from 2013 the conflict's sectarian dimension started to become prominent. Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the significant Egyptian Sunni cleric, said, "The leader of the Party of Satan [referring to Hezbollah] comes to fight the Sunnis... Now we know what the Iranians want...They want continued massacres to kill Sunnis," and encouraged all Sunni Muslims to join the fight against Assad regime. He also claimed that as the

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*: 143-144.

¹⁷¹ Goodarzi, "Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?" 2.

main allies of the regime in Syria, Iran and Hezbollah wanted to exterminate Sunnis.¹⁷² On the other side, the Arab media channels also made emphasis to the sectarian nature of the incidents in various ways. One side saw it like Syria's being under seizure by agents of Gulf Arab states and the West while the opposition was Al-Qaeda-allied terrorists and Israeli intelligence operatives. Whereas some told that President Al-Assad was a monster and he was out to massacre the country's Sunni majority. Some channels were reinforcing role of Iran (as the leader of the Shiite Muslims in the Middle East supporting Al-Assad) against Gulf Arab states led by Saudi Arabia (as a center of Sunni Islam backing the opposition). While some others emphasized that “Sunnis are one blood” and if the opposition was unsuccessful in Syria then there would be slaughter in every Arab country as Shiites were worse than Jews. The media battles in a way had an effect on the perceptions by underlining sectarian lines in the region as well as escalating fears that a local conflict would turn into a regional one.¹⁷³ Additionally, many believe that Iran and Syria follows a policy of ethnic and sectarian cleansing in some parts of Syria. Homs is seen as a good example of this as most of its population comprises of Sunnis so that these regions would be cleansed from the unwanted and repeat the same incidents that have happened.¹⁷⁴

Hezbollah has been the leading foreign militia force fighting for Assad regime with the support of Iran against the rebel forces. At the beginning it had an advisory role till June 2013 when they officially started to combat on the ground.¹⁷⁵ The fight in Syria is of

¹⁷² “Syria conflict: Cleric Qaradawi urges Sunnis to join rebels,” *BBC News* (1 June 2013), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22741588>.

¹⁷³ Sam Dagher, "Arab Media Clash Over Syria," *The Wall Street Journal* (24 March 2012), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203961204577269081450598296>.

¹⁷⁴ Naame Shaam, *Silent Sectarian Cleansing: Iranian Role in Mass Demolitions and Population Transfers in Syria*, 1st Edition (May 2015): 13, 24, (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10195849/Bashar-al-Assads-militias-cleansing-Homs-of-Sunni-Muslims.html>).

¹⁷⁵ Dan De Luce, “Syrian War Takes Rising Toll on Hezbollah,” *Foreign Policy* (9 July 2015), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/09/syrian-war-takes-rising-toll-on-hezbollah/>.

existential importance as the fall of Assad regime would mean Hezbollah's losing its access to its main source of arms, money and training, Iran; therefore, Hezbollah is in a "critical and definitive battle" in Syria. In this regard, Head of Hezbollah's Executive Committee, Nabil Qawooq, states that they will not give up till the fight ends in their favor with his words, "We will finish the war in Syria. We insist on defeating the terrorists and gaining victory against the Takfiri plots in Syria in a move to support Lebanon; because if Syria turns into a center or passage for the ISIL and other terrorist groups, they will not show mercy to Lebanon either."¹⁷⁶

Till today, Iran and Hezbollah's role in Syrian crisis has been very clear. Hezbollah even has been one of the main groups directly fighting in the Syrian territory along with Syrian army and providing help in retaking the places captured by the opposition groups such as Qusair and Yabrud on the Lebanese border as well as Homs. "Lately, we went to places we weren't in during the past years... We were where we needed to be, and we will be where we must be; we believe that this is not [just] the battle of Syrian people, it is defending ourselves: Syria, Lebanon and the entire region,"¹⁷⁷ words of Secretary General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah clearly explains their perception and stance towards ongoing turmoil in Syria. In 2013, Hezbollah forces officially started to fight in Qalamoun to retake the area. It was also confirmed that Hezbollah along with Syrian army was preparing to retake Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur. In Qalamoun, combat of Hezbollah forces alongside the Syrian army were officially revealed.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ "Official: Hezbollah Stays in Syria Until Final Victory," *Fars News Agency* (8 November 2015), <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940817001246>; Max Peck, "Doubling Down on Damascus: Iran's Military Surge to Save the Assad Regime," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies* (January 2016): 9, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Doubling_Down_on_Damascus.pdf.

¹⁷⁷ Sayyed Nasrallah's Full Speech on May 5, 2015, *Alahednews*, <http://www.english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=29326&cid=385#.Vo6whvn-3ow>.

¹⁷⁸ Ali Hashem, "Iran's New Strategy in Syria," *Al-Monitor* (13 May 2015), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2015/05/iran-new-syria-strategy.html#ixzz3uMZLWP9d>.

With the shooting of protesters by the regime forces, many soldiers defected to Free Syrian Army and it quickly grew. In the meantime, rebels managed to seize many cities in Syria. Not to mention many injured and killed soldiers along with its damaged and destroyed tanks and armored vehicles, all these weakened the Syrian Army. In the midst of the crisis, Al-Assad started to transform its professional army into amateur militia forces which is cheaper and easier to train with the help of Iran; yet it is far from providing a strong decisive offensive power against the rebels. Iranians replaced the Syrian army with a militia, the National Defense Force, which is mostly formed by volunteers from Alawites –main supporters of the regime–. An Iranian Revolutionary Corps fighter, Sayyed Hassan Entezari, told about the creation of National Defense Force by Iran as follows, “Syrian army couldn’t handle this three-year crisis because any army would be fatigued [after that long]...Iran came and said why don’t you form popular support for yourself and ask your people for help. Our boys went to one of the biggest Alawite regions. They told the head of one of the major tribes to call upon his youth to take up arms and help the regime...Of course, some of them got martyred.”¹⁷⁹

After Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)¹⁸⁰ announced a self-declared caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at its head in the territory it controls between Aleppo (Syria) and eastern Iraq in June 2014,¹⁸¹ Iran diverted some of its troops in Syria to Iraq to fight

¹⁷⁹ David Axe, “Iran transformed Syria’s army into a militia that will help Syria’s army to survive another year,” *Reuters* (17 December 2014).

¹⁸⁰ *The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh which is an acronym derived from its Arabic name) is a Salafī jihadist militant group that follows an Islamic fundamentalist, Wahhabi doctrine of Sunni Islam. The group has referred to itself as the Islamic State ever since it proclaimed a worldwide caliphate in June 2014 and named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its caliph.* For more information please see: Ishaan Tharoor, “ISIS or ISIL? The debate over what to call Iraq’s terror group” *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/06/18/isis-or-isil-the-debate-over-what-to-call-iraqs-terror-group/>; “What is ‘Islamic State’?” *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>; Bill Roggio, “ISIS announces formation of Caliphate, rebrands as ‘Islamic State’,” *Threat Matrix: A Blog of the Long War Journal*, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/06/isis_announces_formation_of_ca.php.

¹⁸¹ Rebecca Collard, “What We Have Learned Since ISIS Declared a Caliphate One Year Ago,” *TIME* (25 June 2015), <http://time.com/3933568/isis-caliphate-one-year/>.

against it. After all, it made it harder for Iran to strengthen its brigades in Syria. In line with all these information, it is possible to say that both rebels and Assad powers have almost the same capabilities and limitations which may lead to the continuation of the struggle with no victories of any sides. Except from the rising death toll and number of immigrants as well as demolition of the cities, nothing seems to be changing in the short-term.

In the course of the events, the US and its Western allies have always avoided any direct interventions to Syria. This is seen as a calculated part of the “slowly bleeding” strategy for Iran and Hezbollah in Syria. According to this strategy, Syrian opposition would be armed to enable them not to lose war, but not to win the war either, and in the end the prolonged war would weaken Syrian army, Iranian regime and Hezbollah and all these would be far from being a threat against Israel. Additionally, with the economic sanctions against Iran, the regime would also collapse and would be forced to comply with the US interests. The US President Obama made this strategy clear with his statements below:

I’m always darkly amused by this notion that somehow Iran has won in Syria. I mean, you hear, sometimes people saying, ‘They’re winning in Syria’. And you say, ‘This was their one friend in the Arab world, a member of the Arab League, and it is now in rubble’. It’s bleeding them because they’re having to send in billions of dollars. Their key proxy, Hezbollah, which had a very comfortable and powerful perch in Lebanon, now finds itself attacked by Sunni extremists. This isn’t good for Iran. They’re losing as much as anybody. The Russians find their one friend in the region in rubble and delegitimized.¹⁸²

Avoiding cooperation with Assad regime as well as direct intervention, Obama stated that the best way to fight against ISIS in Syria was supporting Syrian opposition while also pursuing the political solution to solve the crisis in Syria. The different approaches towards the ISIS in Syria and Iraq was also seen as an indicator of the “bleeding slowly”

¹⁸² Jeffrey Goldberg, “Obama to Israel -- Time Is Running Out,” *BloombergView* (2 March 2014), <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2014-03-02/obama-to-israel-time-is-running-out>.

strategy against Iran and also Russia. In Iraq, the US was so quick to start air strikes against ISIS despite keeping away from making direct interventions or strikes in Syria and prolonging the bloodshed. This policy seems to remain until the Syrian opposition unites and puts pressure on the US and its allies to change their stances.¹⁸³

On the other hand, there is another point of view going against this “slowly bleeding” strategy and instead claim that the US is working with Iran and Russia behind closed doors to create a favorable environment in Syria and the region which will serve for their separate interests and with no doubt have different aspects for the three powers. The reason why the US directly intervened in Iraq against ISIS was its being much stronger and harmful in Iraq rather than that of in Syria. ISIS in Syria, on the other side, was not posing big danger as well as cooperating with Syria at some points, such as fuel purchase from ISIS-controlled oil facilities,¹⁸⁴ and therefore was not so threatening against Iran at all. Additionally, if the US wanted to weaken Iran’s hand in Syria, then it would not hesitate to directly intervene in Syria or to give effective support to the opposition in order to topple Assad regime. Additionally, the nuclear deal with Iran could also reinforce Iran’s influence in the region if successfully implemented. Therefore, there seems a shift in Washington’s strategy in the region as an outcome of their “pivot to Asia doctrine.”¹⁸⁵ According to this doctrine, rather than continuing to drain capabilities in the Middle East with high costs and low returns, Obama seeks to pursue a “pivot” to East Asia, where rival China was stamping its dominance.¹⁸⁶ Thus,

¹⁸³ Naame Shaam, “Iran in Syria: From an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force,” *Letter From Syria, 1st Edition* (September 2014): 102-105, http://www.naameshaam.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/report_iran_in_syria_201411.pdf.

¹⁸⁴ Aryn Baker, “Why Bashar Assad Won’t Fight ISIS,” *TIME* (26 February 2015), <http://time.com/3719129/assad-isis-asset/>.

¹⁸⁵ Kenneth Lieberthal, “The American Pivot to Asia,” *Foreign Policy* (21 December 2011), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/21/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

¹⁸⁶ Taimur Khan, “Year in review 2015: Iran nuclear deal could redefine US relations with the Middle East,” *The National* (26 December 2015), <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/year-in-review-2015-iran-nuclear-deal-could-redefine-us-relations-with-the-middle-east>.

the US needs a power which can act within the framework of its interests but without being solely dependent on the US' lead to take any actions which could be Iran if agreed, instead of Turkey and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which usually needs the help and lead of the US before taking any actions. All in all, both approaches may have good points, but it is not that easy to know and analyze the real motives while the events and crisis is still ongoing.

In the meantime, for the sake of policy coordination on Syria, Iran moved closer to Russia, and so far they appear to be the main supporters of the current regime as both have common interests and aims in Syria. Both Tehran and Moscow are against a possible regime change and are concerned about the growth of Salafi and Wahhabi movements in Syria.¹⁸⁷ IRGC Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani paid a visit to Russia on July 24 to draw a road map to rescue Assad regime, and in line with the plan a joint offensive was started in October 2015 following Moscow first airstrikes on September 30, 2015 claiming to target ISIS militants. The attacks were focused on retaking territories in northwestern and southern Syria from Sunni rebels. It was even claimed that hundreds of IRGC ground forces joined Lebanese Hezbollah and expanded Shiite Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani militias on the frontlines under the cover of Russian airstrikes in order provide support to the regime's depleted army. During this period, it was also said that Iran was increasing the quantity and quality of arms sent to Syria via its national carriers and Russian military planes.¹⁸⁸

Contrary to what Russia claimed, many analysts believe that the strikes and Moscow's physical involvement to the crisis are far from being against ISIS and the main aim is to

¹⁸⁷ Mohsen Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," *The Washington Quarterly* 36:4 (Fall 2013), <https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/24384/uploads>.

¹⁸⁸ Max Peck, "Doubling Down on Damascus: Iran's Military Surge to Save the Assad Regime," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies* (January 2016): 3, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Doubling_Down_on_Damascus.pdf.

support Assad regime by attacking to rebels as striking in the Homs area cannot be an anti-ISIS strike but an anti-rebel strike. Therefore, Russia's military actions in Syria is seen as a reason to protect its own interests there, specifically its military installations which gives Moscow a foothold in the Middle East as Moscow has an air base in Latakia and a naval facility in Tartus and losing them would be a strategic blow.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, the crisis officially gained an international dimension with Russia's active involvement which seems to strengthen Iran and Syria's hands.

4.2. Future of the Alliance

Recently with the uprisings in Syria, its alliance with Iran has become an asymmetrical relationship and as a result of this changing characteristic of the relations Damascus evolved into an outpost of Iranian influence in Levant. Words of Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani, Iran's top commander in Syria, makes this understanding apparent as he stated, "Syria is the key to the region and has a higher priority than Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen for Iran" in his last interview before his death in October 2015.¹⁹⁰ Deputy Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Brigadier General Hossein Salami also declared, "The national security of Syria and Iran are tied together, and understanding this reality is the philosophy of our presence in Syria."¹⁹¹

Iran is wary of the unrest in Syria as success of the uprisings would encourage the Green Movement¹⁹² to hit the Iranian regime in the same way. In parallel to the fears of the

¹⁸⁹ Christopher Miller, "Why is Russia bombing Syria?" *Mashable* (30 September 2015), <http://mashable.com/2015/09/30/why-is-russia-bombing-syria/#IZumb8MQIqgA>.

¹⁹⁰ Donna Abu-Nasr, Ladane Nasser, "Iran's Syria Aid Deepens as it Jockeys for Role in Talks," *Bloomberg* (26 October 2015), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-27/iran-says-syria-aid-deepens-to-includearmy-revamp-recruitment>.

¹⁹¹ Max Peck, "Doubling Down on Damascus: Iran's Military Surge to Save the Assad Regime," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies* (January 2016): 4, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Doubling_Down_on_Damascus.pdf.

¹⁹² *The Green Movement reached its height when up to 3 million peaceful demonstrators turned out on*

government, the Iranian opposition leaders declared their support to Syrian opposition. They even asked for the government to stop supporting Assad regime while reiterating their support to the revolution in Syria.¹⁹³ In this context, it seems hard for Tehran to cease its support to Damascus and embolden the opposition as it may bring about the same scenario to the future of Iran.

Fall of Assad regime may also affect Iran's regional aims in addition to its domestic environment. Defeat of the current regime may rebut all ideological, sectarian, material, and political efforts made by Tehran to enhance its regional role as well as its current influence from Palestine to Lebanon and Iraq. Its link to Hezbollah which serves as a leverage in Lebanon and the region would be abolished. What is more, it may increase the regional isolation of Iran. Therefore, Tehran would no longer be able to utilize Palestinian cause to get the support of Arab people. All these would bring an end to Iran's regional plans.

On the other hand, there is also the slight possibility that Al-Assad may stay in power. In this case, the two countries would continue their alliance. In order to take the revenge of what has happened during the uprisings, they may turn their alliance into an aggressive one, which has been defensive so far, especially against Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The two allies may try all ways to weaken Ankara and Riyadh's roles in the region.

The current crisis is a big challenge against the thirty-four-year-old Syrian-Iranian alliance. As Goodarzi puts it, if the Assad government is toppled, this would represent a

Tehran streets to protest official claims that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the 2009 presidential election in a landslide. Their simple slogan was: "Where is my vote?" The movement soon embodied the frustrated aspirations of Iran's century-old quest for democracy and desire for peaceful change. For more info, Abbas Milani, The Green Movement, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE The Iran Primer, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/green-movement>.

¹⁹³ Ali Hussain Bakir, "The Syrian Revolution within the Turkish-Iranian Matrix: Current Predicament and Prospects," *Case Analysis Doha Institute* (February 2012): 6.

major setback for Iran.¹⁹⁴ It would be a big loss for the Islamic Republic both in regional and international levels besides being a major setback for the regime's ideological and foreign policy objectives. As it is discussed throughout the thesis, Syria has been the only Arab supporter of Iran and a major channel for Iranian military hardware and material support to Hezbollah in Lebanon as both countries provided Hezbollah an arsenal of some 40,000 rockets and missiles since 2006 Lebanon War.¹⁹⁵ It is a strong possibility that fall of the Assad regime could transform the regional environment as well as Iran's situation against Tehran's will rapidly, especially if the new regime adopts a Sunni fundamentalist, anti-Iranian and anti-Shia stance and chooses to ally with Iran's competitors like Saudi Arabia. Overthrow of the current Syrian regime means losing the most important Arab ally, the conduit for support to Hezbollah and for control of Lebanon, and loss of strength against the US and Israel. That is to say, it is not an unexpected development that Iran provides all the support to keep the Assad government in power at a point where the alliance and the faith of both countries are at crossroads. Additionally, after all these incidents, if Bashar Al-Assad manages to remain in power, there is no doubt that he will be in severe need of help of its one and only old friend in the region to be able to survive.

The current civil war in Syria is not in Iran's interest as it inflames sectarianism and Sunni militancy in the region, such as the actions of ISIS. Tehran hopes for a peaceful solution to be able to reach a compromise that would keep Bashar in power. However, such a solution does not seem so viable anymore. Yet, some analysts assume that Iranian influence may still continue after the regime falls if existence of Iranian military power and Hezbollah can continue in Syria. Thus, keeping the possibility of the fall of Al-Assad in mind, it is believed that Iran is not only making attempts to keep Bashar Al-

¹⁹⁴ For more information: Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment."

¹⁹⁵ For details on Iranian support to Syria, see "Three-Way Bet: Hizbullah's Strategic Dilemma in Lebanon," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (November 2011): 30.

Assad in power, but also preparing for a post-Assad era in which Iran-controlled militias can have an influence and save Tehran's interests [being securing arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon the primary goal] in the country.¹⁹⁶

On the other hand, Russian intervention which started in September 2015 added a new dimension to Iranian involvement in Syria, and Iran deployed hundreds of IRGC ground forces for a coordinated operation. A US defense official said, "It has always been understood in [the Pentagon] that the Russians would provide the air force, and the Iranians would provide the ground force in Syria."¹⁹⁷ An unnamed Lebanese source also approved this perception as he said in contrast to previous ones, these troops were "not advisers ... we mean hundreds with equipment and weapons," and added "they will be followed by more."¹⁹⁸

Some observers¹⁹⁹ see that although common and immediate objective of keeping Al-Assad in power have united Iran and Russia on Syria in the short run, the unity will be damaged in the long term as difference regarding the understandings of Russia and Iran on Syria's future, reshaping of government and the military. Russia is redefining its role in the world as it is trying to show that it is turning to the Middle East and it is still a

¹⁹⁶ Naame Shaam, "Iran in Syria: From an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force," *Letter From Syria* 1st Edition, (September 2014): 65, http://www.naameshaam.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/report_iran_in_syria_201411.pdf.

¹⁹⁷ "Iranian Troops Prepare to Aid Russia with Syrian Ground Assault, Officials Say," *Fox News*, 1 October 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/10/01/cia-backed-rebels-civiliansreportedly-targeted-by-russian-airstrikes-in-syria/>.

¹⁹⁸ Laila Bassam, and Andrew Osborn, "Iran Troops to Join Syria War, Russia Bombs Group Trained by CIA," *Reuters* (2 October 2015), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/01/us-mideastcrisis-russia-syria-idUSKCN0RV41O20151001>.

¹⁹⁹ Saheb Sadeghi, "Why Iran and Russia aren't as closely aligned on Syria as you might think," *Almonitor* (10 November 2015), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/iran-russia-syria.html#ixzz3wOnq8vV8>; Salman Rafi, "What does Russia's presence in Syria mean for Iran?" *Asia Times* (10 December 2015), <http://atimes.com/2015/12/what-does-russias-presence-in-syria-mean-for-iran/>.

super power. There is also the assumption that Russia is trying to test its new weapons and air force in Syria.²⁰⁰ Moscow has been a good ally of Damascus in the past decades with exportation of big numbers of weaponry to Syria and Tartus serving as the main logistical hub for the arms shipments. What is more, Russia provided training for many Syrian commanders and senior officers. Therefore, it is possible to say that there is military dependence on Russia. In light of this information, Moscow would be willing to see a secular, easily controllable influential Syrian army in the country. Iran, on the other side, is also trying to reshape its living space in the region. Tehran is pursuing the exactly opposite path by strengthening irregular forces supported by Shiite volunteers [comprising of approximately about 20,000 Shiites from Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan]²⁰¹ as the army was collapsing. Now, these irregular forces are much powerful in the field and mostly taking orders from Iran rather than the Syrian government. Tehran may utilize them as an acceptable alternative to the current Syrian government.

As Moscow is seen close to use Syria as a tool to get concessions regarding Ukraine from Europe and the US, and even Russia and the US have the potential to come together on the future of Syria, it seems in contrast with the interests of Tehran. Additionally, as radical Islamists are seen as a common threat and there is no other tangible alternative, both Washington and Moscow share the idea that Syria should be secular and democratic. In the same way, there were even some news that President Putin made discussions with leaders from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel, and indicated Moscow sought to limit Iranian influence in any negotiated

²⁰⁰ Reid Standish, "Russia Is Using Syria as a Training Ground for Its Revamped Military and Shiny New Toys," *Foreign Policy*, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/09/russia-is-using-syria-as-a-training-ground-for-its-revamped-military-and-shiny-new-toys/>.

²⁰¹ Sadeghi, "Why Iran and Russia aren't as closely aligned on Syria as you might think," *Almonitor* (10 November 2015), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/iran-russia-syria.html#ixzz3wOnq8vV8>.

settlements in Syria.²⁰² However, for Iran, it is of vital importance that Syria maintains its anti-Israeli stance and continue to be a bridge to Hezbollah while these points are not even among the concerns of Russia. Thus, sooner or later, these differences may come to the surface in Syria.

If the balance favors the Al-Assad with the help of Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, it is easy to predict that Syria's dependence on Iran and Russia will be increasing considering the regional and international isolated situation of the country with its ruined infrastructure and economy. This will surely serve for the benefit of the long-lasting ally Iran's favor. Yet if Al-Assad loses the fight, then most probably Iran will have to look for new ways to maintain and reinforce its influence and leverages in the region.

4.3. Chapter Conclusion with Theoretical Analysis

Although its power reached a rock-bottom in early 2000s, Damascus' power gained momentum after 2006 as the US reached a dead end in Iraq and Hezbollah and Hamas were strengthened. Yet now another downgrade in Damascus' strength is being witnessed with the ongoing uprisings in the country. Regarding the unchanging nature of the regional and international atmosphere considering the stances towards both countries, the alliance still remained to be a defensive one. That is to say, the alliance worked for deterring Israel and spoiling regional developments but was not enough to shape regional events. But still it is of vital importance for both as dynamics have not changed to their favor and Syria is in drastic need of Iran even in terms of its very own domestic survival.

As the Syrian uprisings still remain to be a hot topic on the table, it is hard to analyze all

²⁰² Jay Solomon, "US Eyes Russia-Iran Split in Bid to End Syria Conflict," *The Wall Street Journal* (19 November 2015), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-eyes-russia-iran-split-in-bid-to-end-syria-conflict-1447895357>.

the facts and reasons thoroughly. At this period of the two state relations, omni-balancing theory comes to the scene. Omni-balancing sees the main goal of Third World leaders as staying in power and protecting themselves at the expense of state interests, and therefore, it assumes that the leaders need to balance against both internal and external threats in order to survive in power.²⁰³

As the illegitimacy of Bashar Al-Assad was accepted by many layers of Syrian society following the uprisings and the domestic threats came out with the possibility of a regime change, he needed to ensure his political and physical survival through external alignments which was basically Iran, Hezbollah and later Russia. These were the best means of balancing against current principal threat which is domestic rather than external. As much as Al-Assad loses domestic power, he needs more external help and support. In this regard, support of Iran and Hezbollah and also Russia helps him to last much longer which he would not be able to do without the help of his trustable allies.

Yet apparently, involvement of all regional and international powers following the domestic developments, directly or indirectly, to the issue still encourages the maintenance of the alignment. In that vein, Iran without the Assad regime may not be able to keep its sphere of influence in the region as its access road may probably be abolished as the current stance of opposition powers show. Therefore, the merging critical interests once again leads the two powers to engage with each other increasingly and inevitably.

Additionally, although it was always discussed but not seen as one of the main pillars of the alliance, the identity factor also became much apparent during the uprisings. As shown in this chapter, the sectarian discussions and issues came to the surface much more than ever as the Assad regime lost power and many actors got involved into the crisis. The emerging power vacuum let all regional actors to take the opportunity to

²⁰³ David, "Explaining Third World Alignment:" 236.

manipulate and interpret the issue in their favor. Therefore, the sectarian dimension of the alliance started to be spoken out increasingly in order to show Iran and Assad as sectarianist actors and shape the perceptions to dismiss them out of the power game in the region.

When it comes to sectarian ideology and identity, it would not be possible for Assad regime to totally ignore the sectarian politics within a multi-sectarian Alawi-dominated regime. In a way, this Alawi-dominant structure made it easier for Syria to ally with Iran, despite risking the Sunni-dominant public base's support. If it was a Sunni regime, then alliance with Iran would seem too dangerous to attempt no matter what advantage it may have brought. Nevertheless, as Ehteshami and Hinnebusch explains it, Syrian regime "sees the Alawi community as best served by identification with the wider interests of the Syrian Ba'thist state and the Arab nation."²⁰⁴ Drawing a line between the Alawi and Sunni and showing sectarian closeness as a reason of the alliance with Tehran would endanger the regime stability. Over and above, both father and son Assads' policies has been far from revisionist religious terms as well as being secular and supportive of the integrity of secular and multi-sectarian states in Iraq and Lebanon.²⁰⁵ It is not possible to totally ignore the role of sectarian sentiments in reinforcing the alliance and its policies as Barnett puts it as identity makes some more desirable than others as partners.²⁰⁶ However, advantages and necessity of alliance seems to be enough to explain the reason of this alliance formation without mentioning the religious solidarity. In this regard, religious connections may have allowed the parties to gain mutual trust; although, it may not be a building block for this alignment.

With the start of the rebels in Syria and Assad's losing power and control in some parts

²⁰⁴ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (Routledge: London and New York, 1997): 98.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*: 99.

²⁰⁶ Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," 400-466.

of the country, Iran's support gained importance much more than ever for the regime which was left almost with no international support. Therefore, Assad regime became more dependent on Tehran's partnership and help. The balance in the two country relations started to change and have an asymmetrical shape with Syria's increasing dependency on Iran. Yet, different from all periods of this alignment, Syria's dependency during the uprisings does not decrease the dependency and need of Iran to Syria and put Tehran in an advantageous position before Syria as the overthrow of Assad regime may also directly bring about the end of this alliance and disadvantage Iran.

Despite all these reasons and motivations to keep the alliance alive, there are also limits of this alliance as well as all others do and this uprisings period made these limits much more apparent than ever. Possible scenarios which may bring the end of this alliance can be the disappearance of common threats (such as the US existence in the region, Israeli threat), a probable US-Iranian engagement which is currently on the table and overthrow of the Assad regime which may end up with an anti-Iranian regime's coming to power. As the past experiences show any other short term disagreements or different policies could not challenge the very existence of the Syrian-Iranian alliance, there does not seem any other possibilities which may bring an end to this alignment in the near future.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Alliance politics has always played an important role in the Middle East where states usually build alliances with neighboring states. Due to the regional systemic characteristics which usually comprises of mistrust and insecurity, the Middle Eastern alliances have a shifting and short-lived nature. Taking this regional feature into consideration, the durability of the Syrian-Iranian alliance is usually seen exceptional in the Middle East. However, when the reasons and motives behind this alliance is examined with the help of the theoretical approaches to alliances, it does not appear as an extra-ordinary or surprisingly long-lasting formation since most of the requirements for alliance formation seem to match in domestic, regional and international levels as it is analyzed in this thesis. The Syrian-Iranian alliance proved to be durable due to the existence of overlapping strategic interests coupled with the role of pragmatic and rational elites and trust between the regimes in the course of international and regional developments. Therefore, the main conclusion of this thesis is that all these factors as well as their common threat perceptions and security considerations made this alliance favorable and irreplaceable for both Damascus and Tehran while also proving it to be a perfectly realist pragmatic type of alliance rather than being a sectarian and ideology-based alignment.

As seen in the second chapter of this study, Syrians were crucial in providing Iran with diplomatic and military support during the Iran-Iraq war and the Iranians were essential for Syria's energy needs during the same period, and military needs after the Cold War. At the same time, they had been balancing their ability to engage with other international actors on ground of their relative bargaining position. And the same characteristics of the relations maintained in 2000s as well. These points give us an idea about a common

characteristic of policy making, to some extent at least, the smart use of politics and pragmatism to serve national interests by both Iran and Syria.

Since it is a relatively small-sized alliance consisting of two states and some non-state actors like Hezbollah, this feature became an advantage and made it easier to eliminate the differences and balance between changing interests and stances when needed. It made the alliance more viable and durable since small alliances would be expected to be more effective with more significant contributions from both members with a less possibility of incompatibility.

The historical cases in the thesis show that Iran and Syria's foreign policy principles and attitudes have been remarkably consistent over the last three decades. They exhibit the same hostility to foreign interference and have pragmatic understanding of alliance formation from 1979 up until today. Mainly the keyword for this alignment is security. Nonetheless, economic needs and constant changes in the regional balance of power necessitated Tehran and Damascus to adapt their policies accordingly in times of conflicting interests and policies and they have engaged into a continuous and close alliance based on common enemies, allies, political and economic interests and similar religious affiliations.

In the same way, as emphasized in many parts of this study, complimentary but at the same time different interests of Damascus and Tehran makes it easier for them to reach an agreement on many issues. In this regard, when we look at the Syrian-Iranian alliance, we see two different countries with diversified interests and roles of dealing with different issues. Additionally, the risk of clashes arising from incompatibilities are also reduced to a remarkable extent as the priority areas of the two states differ from each other [the Gulf for Iran and Levant for Syria] not to mention the contribution of both countries' efforts to consult each other and coordinate their policies. While being aware of their position and each other's strategic importance in the region, they tactfully

tried and managed to coordinate and accommodate each other and their policies while also pursuing their own interests. In Arab-Israeli cases, Syrian interests were at stake and Syria had the role of checking out the Israeli power whereas Iranian interests took precedence when Gulf security was on the agenda and Iran was the guard against Iraqi expansionism. The two countries seem to recognize and act according to these facts. Therefore, to some extent they also managed to find a way to harmonize their stances and maintain their alliance for more than 30 years through consultation and dialogue despite disagreements and clashing interests from time to time. As the two powers' main priorities are different in the arenas in which they cooperate, their interests do not crash and usually complimentary, these facts provide longevity and stability to the alliance.

Moreover, defensive nature of the alliance framed with limited objectives of neutralizing Israel and Iraq's hand in the Gulf and Near East, and the US in the Middle East made the alliance durable and stable. Defensive alliances are usually seen much stronger than the offensive ones as the offensive alliances usually dissolve when the opponent is beaten and the victory is won. The alliance has been quite defensive as can be seen in efforts of preventing the US from expanding its power in the Middle East and neutralizing Iraq and Israel in the region. As the challenges still remain in the regional arena along with new domestic ones, the defensive nature of their relations and cooperation encourages both to keep and strengthen their alliance. However, in spite of all these reasons to maintain the alliance, the possible limits of this alliance became more apparent with Syrian uprisings. The possibilities which may bring an end to this long-lasting alignment may be the abolishment of mutual threats (such as the US existence in the region, Israeli threat), a probable success of the US-Iranian engagement which is currently being discussed, and replacement of Assad regime with an anti-Iranian regime. As the past experiences show any other short term disagreements or different policies could not challenge the very existence of the Syrian-Iranian alliance, there does not seem any other strong possibilities which may bring an end to this alignment in the near future.

One of the main conclusions of this study is that common threats and security concerns have been the main uniting factor of this alignment; that is to say, common external threats have been the cement of Syrian-Iranian alliance and made it the subject of realist assumptions. The alignment was a reaction and counterbalancing move against any imbalance situation to the detriment of Tehran and Damascus in the region. In this regard, especially after the collapse of the pan-Arab order and then Soviet Union increased dependency of most Arab states on the US power and a suitable environment for Tehran and Syria to form an alliance to counter against this emerged as a result of the power vacuum. When faced with international pressures, Syria relies on Iran as well as depending on Tehran as a significant ally in strategic balancing acts following Syria's short-lived bandwagoning effort with the US. In return, Damascus becomes mainstay for Iran in the Arab world and the Arab-Israeli issue. Hezbollah, in this manner, provides the two countries with a foothold concerning their aspirations and interests in Lebanon. The two countries have a close security cooperation which is strengthened by Iran's supply of arms and military hardware to Syria and Damascus' serving as a corridor for Hezbollah-bound weapons. This made the alliance and the ties between the two countries very strategic and important for each other and created an enduring and desirable alliance as it strengthened the hands of both countries as it enabled them to act in a much more effective way than they would have individually and also weakened the impact of isolation attempts against both.

Apart from balancing and bandwagoning tendencies seen during the course of the relations, last phase of the relations which is the period of Syrian uprisings witnesses the realization of omni-balancing theory. As omni-balancing assumes that leaders need to balance against both internal and external threats in order to survive, stay in power and protect themselves at the expense of state interests, the outcome of the uprisings matches with this assumption. While Al-Assad is trying to maintain his power and keep his control in the country in addition to international pressures, Syria's alliance with Iran again appears to be the most reliable life saver. In the same way, Al-Assad's survival

remains to be a strategic key in Tehran's hands. Therefore, Al-Assad utilizes an external power's (Iran's) support to be able to balance against both domestic and international dangers.

Strategically speaking, the alliance was a way to prevent themselves from being isolated in world politics in times of unpopular policies. Syria as well as Iran has experienced periods of international isolation. Iran had suffered from having very little support during the Iran-Iraq war, but it received Syria's support. On the other hand, Syria has become increasingly isolated after the assassination of Lebanese president Hariri in 2005, despite this and the violent crackdown of the Bashar regime in 2011 after the mass demonstrations across the country, Iran continued to support Al-Assad. Regarding common enemies, anti-American and anti-Zionist sentiments have been an intrinsic part of their foreign policy. Iran could not afford to break ties with Syria. This would have meant more regional and international isolation. For Syria, Tehran is an irreplaceable partner in the region. Iran supplies military hardware and diplomatic leverage in dealing with many regional and international issues. Furthermore, the alliance provides legitimacy and facilitates Damascus' ties with Hezbollah and Hamas.

Additionally, it would not be easy neither for Syria nor for Iran to find another ally with the same function and/or utility in the region when the alliance falls apart and it would have a cost for each. Alliances contribute to state power and may provide additional deterrence, political, diplomatic support as well as legitimacy and strategic depth. In line with this, Iran and Syria tried and managed to maintain their alliance this long and alive till now as both countries are the only reliable state allies for each other since 1980s.

Both Iran and Damascus have an anti-Zionist and anti-Western foreign policy approach. They both aim to counter the US hegemony and influence as well as countering Israeli threat in the region. Iran tries to form alliances and balance against the US since it is perceived as one of the main threats. Also the America's rhetoric and desire for regime

change in Syria and Iran increases these two countries' perception of threat as well as their willingness to balance against the US. In this regard, both countries are trying to avoid being the next target of the US' democratization agenda and being a second Iraq. To this end, Iran and Syria regards their alliance as a means to balance the US influence in the Middle East. In a way, the anti-Western feelings and shared threat perceptions serve as a driving force for the Syrian-Iranian alliance. What is more, this alliance gives Iran a chance to challenge the US' ally Saudi Arabia and strengthen its own influence in the region. Also, both utter anti-Zionist statements; however, the underlying causes seem to differ slightly. In Syria, these sentiments originate from the loss of the Golan Heights, whereas Iran tended to use its anti-Israel rhetoric as an extension of their anti-American feelings to gain popular support in the Arab world. Nonetheless, also Syria used it to gain support domestically and abroad.

The two countries also share the alliances with the same non-state actors like Hezbollah. They have common strategic interests in the region, especially concerning Hezbollah in Lebanon. One of the main policy priorities of Syria has been keeping the control of Lebanon. Many hard-liner nationalist even sees Lebanon as a part of the greater Syria which was separated artificially by the French. To be able to keep its influence and power on Lebanon, Damascus needs allies and Iranian-backed Hezbollah perfectly serves for it. Lebanon is important for Syria and should not be under the control of anti-Syrian forces. Any damage to Lebanon could directly affect Syria as it is the only friendly country among all other neighbors –despite bettering relations from time to time, hostile Turkey; one of the biggest enemies Israel; pro-Western Jordan; rival (especially between 1963-2003) Baathist Iraq.– There is also the unwanted possibility of emergence of anti-Syrian activities of the Syrian exiles in the country in case an unfriendly government comes to power in Beirut. What is more, Lebanon provides an alternative labor market for the excessive Syrian work force. Loss of Lebanon may cause an extra economic pressure on Syria. Hezbollah's position in the country, as Damascus and Iran's henchman, lets Damascus remain its influence in Lebanon. In the

same way, as it provides a lifeline support through Iran, Syria is of significant importance for Lebanon's Hezbollah. Iran has also been utilizing Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon as entrée to Levant and even threaten Israel by this way.

Good relations with Iran damaged Syria's relations with Arab countries. As Baathism is the main ideology, Syria needs Arab cooperation, damaging these relations creates disadvantages for Syria from time to time. Therefore, Syrian officials are mostly emphasizing Syria's Arab roots while describing Syria's relations with Iran more pragmatic rather than ideological one. Since the beginning there has not been an emphasis on ideological or religious affinity in Syria's support for Iran, and usually there was the role of pragmatic politics on the scene. At first, Syria supported Iran because Syria's biggest unchanging rival and enemy had been Iraq for decades. Moreover, its alliance with Tehran let Damascus to have some control over pro-Iranian Shia forces in Lebanon and provided the ability to use them as a proxy force to impose its own design there. In supporting Iran, Syria stood against the general Arab country's stance of siding by Iraq. Even these initial steps and logic of Syria gives a general idea on the pragmatism rather than ideological and identity values, a principle which the Iranians similarly embrace.

Syria and Iran has been independently acting countries with their elites sharing certain perceptions. Both countries have been considering the region as a whole and believed that their alliance is a key element for their own benefit and strengthening their hand while diminishing the foreign influence especially that of the US. That is to say, both countries are aware their alliance and therefore common agenda is of significant importance in achieving future goals; thus, both regimes managed to put their longer-term interests before short-term gains doubtlessly. Regarding the two state relations, Iran has never tried to be the leader of Arab nationalism as it is not an Arab country in contrast to Syria which sees itself as the core of Arabism. On the other hand, Syria does

not seek for the leadership of Islamic revivalism in the region unlike Iran. Therefore, there has been no competition or fear between the two countries due to their different ideologies; although regime survival and national security have been the main pillars of foreign policy making for both countries. In line with this, Iran's main policy objectives have been, being the primary regional player in Persian Gulf affairs; ensuring that a hostile government does not emerge in Baghdad; and promoting Islamic interests in the region. As for Syria, on the other hand, these objectives have been regaining Israeli occupied Golan Heights; at least having veto power over Lebanese politics to make sure that its government does not pursue policies conflicting with Syrian interests; promoting Arab interests.

When it comes to ideology, it is usually used by the Middle Eastern regimes as a tool to foster their own power and influence inside and outside the country. The alliance experiences in the region shows that when the parties to the alliance shares a common ideology, they usually have a tendency to compete for the takeover of leadership rather than form an enduring alignment and reap its benefits. Furthermore, each ally may claim to be the legitimate ruler, and even demand other partners give up their sovereignty and rights for the sake of forming a single political entity under his umbrella. Therefore, generally any attempts between two or more regional countries sharing the same or similar ideologies and goals brought about short-lived cooperation attempts especially in the Middle East. That is to say, different ideologies also help this alliance to be durable unlike the ones established between the ones with the same ideology. As in the case of Syria and Iran, if the alliance is not shaped by a certain doctrinal understanding and ideology, the possibility of competition between the members remains low and this increases the capability to negotiate and solve the internal issues and differences.

Iran and Syria have diverse characteristics as Iran has the ideology of the Islamic revolution as well as being Persian while Syria has a secular, socialist-oriented and pan-Arabic ideology. Although these two ideologies seem irreconcilable, the two regimes

found common ground regarding many regional issues. As Revolutionary Iran became anti-West, anti-Egypt, anti-Iraq and anti-Israel, it appeared to be a realistic chance for Syria to have the regional balance of power to its favor. Additionally, Syria had to keep its influence over Lebanon's Shiites, and therefore good relations with Tehran would ensure Damascus the support of Lebanon's Shiite. On the other hand, Iran was in bad need of allies in the aftermath of establishment of Revolutionary Iran. The Shia theocracy and secular Arab nationalist Syrian Baath Party had many fundamental differences, their common interests let them overcome these. Even if the founder of Baathist Syria, Hafiz Al-Assad and his successor Bashar Al-Assad are from Alawi sect of Shiism, bilateral relations remained mostly based on shared interests instead of religious kinship. Syria allied with Iran during Iran-Iraq War unlike all other Arab countries. They united their confrontation against Israel. Iran managed to channel support to Hezbollah through Syria. Both countries managed to roll back US pressure against both of them. Despite all efforts to separate these two, they got much closer. Therefore, for the ideology part, the ruling elites of the two countries are Shiite although they adhere to different types of it and as it does not simply shape or affect the alliance between these two countries, the combined hostility towards the Sunni Arab countries as well as the West reinforces the religious bonds.

Regarding the sectarian ideology and identity, it would not be possible for Assad regime to totally ignore the sectarian politics within a multi-sectarian Alawi-dominated regime. Actually, for Syria, this Alawi-dominant structure makes it easier to ally with Iran; although it somehow jeopardizes the Sunni-dominant Syrian public base's support. It can be assumed that if it was a Sunni regime, then alliance with Iran would seem too risky and dangerous to attempt no matter what advantage it may have brought. Nevertheless, Syrian regime sees and identifies the Alawi community as part of the larger Syrian Arab community and merges its interests with the interests of the Syrian Ba'athist state and the Arab nation. Drawing a concrete line between the Alawi and Sunni and pointing out to sectarian affinity as a reason of the alignment with Tehran would put

regime and the stability in danger. There has not been any emphasis on revisionist religious terms in Syrian policy during Assads as they were more secular and supportive of the integrity of secular and multi-sectarian states in Iraq and Lebanon. In the same way, there has not been an open emphasis on the sectarian side in the formation of the alignment. At this point, common interests, encouraging domestic, regional and international environments, advantages and necessity of alliance can be stated as the main pillars of Syrian-Iranian alliance strategy without underlining their religious solidarity and affinity. Yet still it is not possible to totally ignore the role of sectarian sentiments in reinforcing the alliance and its policies as identity makes some parties to the alignments much more desirable than others. In this regard, religious connections may assumed to have allowed the parties to gain mutual trust and form such an enduring alliance.

Although Syria was perceived to be as a tool to Iran's efforts proselytization into Shiism sometimes, the sectarian bonds were always discussed but not strongly voiced as one of the main motivations of the alliance. The sectarian identity factor started to be loudly expressed following the uprisings. As discussed in fourth chapter, the sectarian arguments came to the surface much more than ever as Assad lost power and many actors got involved into the crisis with the newly emerging power vacuum in the country. This environment let all regional actors to utilize from the situation in their favor. Therefore, the sectarian dimension of the alliance started to be spoken out increasingly in order to show Iran and Assad as sectarianist actors and shape the perceptions to dismiss them out of the power game in the region. Yet, still security and pragmatic interests remain to be the ultimate driving forces behind this alliance notwithstanding the sectarian discussions.

Despite ups and downs, in general the alliance had a balanced course of dependency between Tehran and Damascus. During Iran-Iraq War, Iran was more dependent on Syria and its support. Later with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Syria's dependency

on Iran noticeably increased, and in this case Tehran's support to Damascus brought about some balance to the relationship. The following periods the alliance and dependency between Iran and Syria had a more balanced course. However, this balance has become asymmetrical with the start of the uprisings in Syria. Assad regime has become too much dependent on Tehran's partnership and help as it has left with almost no other international and regional support. Yet, this time, this asymmetrical relationship puts both powers at risk as a possible regime change in Syria may also directly bring about the end of this alliance and disadvantage Iran as well.

All in all, this study shows that all these factors added to each other makes the Syrian-Iranian alignment in the region inevitable and long lasting. In such a penetrated region with many different actors, international, regional and even domestic situations, merging interests and to some extent identities brought about Iran and Syria together and laid the suitable basis to keep it strong and functional for more than 36 years already. At the moment, the domestic situation in Syria seems to jeopardize the future of the alliance and the path of the incidents will determine the fate of the relations.

The region witnessed such an exceptionally long-lasting and influential alliance. And now the question is whether the region may have a similar alliance if the variables come together again. And if the two states can remain allies in either scenarios of overthrow of Al-Assad and his remaining in power. The time and the new developments will lead us to the answers of these questions.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY

Söylem ve politikaları bölgesel ve uluslararası alanda büyük endişe yaratmış ve çoğunluklaa eleştirilmişse de Suriye ve İran Ortadoğu'nun en uzun süreli ittifakını kurmayı başardı. Dışardan müdahalelere karşı aynı tehdit algısına ve ittifak oluşumuna yönelik aynı pragmatik yaklaşıma sahip olan bu iki ülke aynı zamanda politikalarını birbirine uyarlayabilme ve ortak noktayı bulabilme kabiliyetleri sayesinde bu çok konuşulan ittifakı oldukça uzun süre ayakta tutabildiler. Ortak düşmanlara, müttefiklere, siyasi ve ekonomik çıkarlara ve yakın dini ilişkilere sahip bu iki ülke gerektiğinde iktisadi, siyasi ve askeri olarak birbirlerini destekleyip bölgesel etki alanlarını genişletti. Bu ittifak dar bir şekilde tanımlanmış pragmatik ve sürekli değişken bir karaktere sahip olmakla eleştirildi ve hatta “anlaşmalı evlilik,” “stratejik müttefiklik” ve “garip yatak arkadaşlığı” gibi farklı isimlerle adlandırıldı. Ancak tüm bu eleştiri ve sorgulamalara rağmen, böylesi sorunlu bir bölgede Tahran-Şam ittifakının varlığını korumayı başarması oldukça şaşırtıcı bulunmaktadır.

Bu çerçevede, bu tezin ana amacı özellikle Beşşar Esad dönemine vurguyla Suriye-İran ittifakının oluşumu ve gelişiminin, bu sıradışı müttefiklik ilişkisinin özelliklerinin ve 30 yılı aşkın bir süredir sürdürülebilir oluşunun incelenmesidir. Bu ittifakın daha iyi anlaşılabilmesi adına yalnızca olaylar üzerinde durulmayacak aynı zamanda ittifak teorileri çerçevesinde bu olayların değerlendirmesi ve analizi de yapılacaktır. Kısacası bu tezle literatürde var olan bir boşluğun doldurulması ve 1979 yılında başlayıp 2000'lerde de varlığını sürdüren bu ittifakın uluslararası ilişkiler alanında önemli bir yeri olan ittifak teorileri bağlamında özellikle 11 Eylül olayları, 2003 Irak Savaşı, 2006 Lübnan Savaşı ve Suriye ayaklanmalarına değinilerek incelenmesi amaç edinilmiştir.

Konuya ilişkin olarak özellikle de Beşşar Esad dönemine ilişkin ve aynı zamanda bu ilişkiyi ittifak teorileri çerçevesinde inceleyen çalışmaların yeterli sayıda ve içerikte

olduğunu söylemek oldukça zor. Literatürün yetersizliğinin yanı sıra Beşşar Esad döneminin henüz sona ermemiş olması ve olayların halihazırda devam ediyor olması da detaylı bir analiz yapılabilmesini zorlaştıran etkenlerden olmuştur. Yeterli kaynağın olmaması ve teorik açıdan analizlerin az sayıda olması ve ittifak teorilerine tam anlamıyla değinmemesi çalışma esnasından karşılaşılan zorluklardan olsa da aynı zamanda da bu çalışmayla alana katkıda bulunulabilmesinin önünü açmış ve bu alanda çalışmak için önemli bir motivasyon kaynağı olmuştur.

Ortadoğu, bölgesel politikaların şekillendirilmesinde müttefiklik politikalarının önemli rol oynadığı bir bölge olmuştur. Ancak bölgenin genel karakterinde olan itimatsızlık ve güvensizlik Ortadoğu’da oluşturulan ittifak ilişkilerinin kısa süreli ve kaygan zeminli olmasına neden olmaktadır. Bu sistemsel şartlar altında Suriye-İran ittifakının 30 yılı aşkın bir süredir varlığını sürdürüyor olması, birçokları tarafından bu ittifakın olağandışı ve hatta diğer tüm nedenler bir yana bırakılarak mezhepsel bağların bir sonucu olarak görülmesine sebep olmuştur. Ancak bu müttefiklik ilişkisinin arkasındaki sebepler ve yerel, bölgesel ve uluslararası gelişmeler ittifak teorileri çerçevesinde göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, Suriye-İran ittifakının sıra dışı ve şaşırtıcı derecede uzun süreli olmaktan ziyade doğal bir oluşum olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Özellikle ittifaklar oluşturulurken güvenliğin rolüne yapılan realist vurgu, bu iki ülke ittifakı düşünüldüğünde öne çıkan temel etmen olmaktadır. Buna bağlı olarak bu tez, mezhepsel yöne yapılan vurguların aksine güvenlik bazlı bu müttefiklik ilişkisinin realist varsayımlarla uyduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

Bu çalışmada değinilen teorik varsayımlar göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, Şam-Tahran müttefikliğinin uzun soluklu oluşunun ardındaki sebepler de ayrıca irdelenmektedir. Pragmatik ve rasyonel elitlerin birbiriyle uyuşan stratejik çıkarları ve benzer anlayışları ve iki rejimin bölgesel ve uluslararası gelişmeler karşısında birbirine olan bağımlılığı bu ilişkiyi beslemektedir; dolayısıyla, tarihi ve yaşanmakta olan olaylar temel alınarak bu nedenler de tek tek değerlendirilmektedir. Suriye ve İran için bu ittifakı vazgeçilmez ve

gerekli kılan tüm bu faktörler ittifak teorilerinin analitik çerçevesinde incelenmektedir. Bu çalışma, Suriye'nin İran'la ittifakının komplike bir sistem içinde algılanmakta olan iç ve dış tehditlere karşı denge politikalarının bir sonucu olarak görülebilir. Buna ek olarak, bu ittifakın küçük boyutlu ve savunma amaçlı mahiyette oluşu, dini benzerlikler ve kimlikler (elitler bazında) ve gerektiği durumlarda uzlaşmaya varma yetisi, bu iki ülke arasındaki müttefikliğe ayrıca ek değer katmaktadır. Buna ek olarak Rothstein'in da belirttiği gibi, "bir ittifak bir kere oluşturulduğunda, çok az fonksiyonu olsa dahi bu müttefikliğin devam ettirilmesinde pozitif bir değer vardır." Tüm bu etkenler düşünüldüğünde iki ülke arasındaki bu ittifak ilişkisi, çok boyutlu ve farklı fakat ilişkili faktörlerin bir sonucu olarak görülmekte ve bu minvalde değerlendirilmektedir.

Konunun detaylı bir incelemesinin yapılması adına bu tez, tarihi olaylar kapsamında Suriye-İran ilişkilerini üç farklı zaman periyoduna bölerek incelemektedir. Bu bağlamda, 1979-2000, 2000-2011 ve son olarak ayaklanmalar dönemi ele alınmaktadır. İlk dönem 1979 yılıyla başlamaktadır ve bu yıl yaşanan İran'daki rejim değişikliğinin bu ittifakın tohumlarının atıldığı temel etmen olması sebebiyle iki ülke ilişkileri bağlamında bir dönüm noktası teşkil etmektedir. 1979-2000 yılları arasında, Hafız Esad Suriye'nin başındaydı ve bu yıllar arasında yaşanan gelişmeler Suriye-İran partnerliğinin temelini oluşturmaktadır. Baba Esad'ın ölümüyle Beşşar Esad dönemi 2000 yılında başlamaktadır ve dolayısıyla bu dönemin Suriye'de yaşanan ayaklanmalara kadar olan kısmı 11 Eylül olaylarına, 2003 Irak Savaşı'na ve 2006 Lübnan Savaşı'na özel bir vurguyla daha detaylı bir şekilde ayrı bir bölümde incelenmektedir. Bir sonraki bölümde ise son dönemde yaşanmakta olan Suriye ayaklanmalarının ve bunların etkilerinin yanı sıra gelecek senaryoları değerlendirilmektedir. Her bir bölümde kronolojik olaylarla tarihi arka plan verildikten sonra bu olayların teorik analizi yapılmaktadır. İki ülke ilişkilerinin detayları ve teorik analizler bu üç bölümde verildikten sonra, bu tez çalışması bu ittifakın niteliklerini ve ittifak teorileriyle uyumluluğunu test etmektedir.

Bu çalışmanın ikinci bölümünde görüldüğü üzere, Suriye İran'a diplomatik ve askeri

destek sağlaması sebebiyle İran-Irak Savaşı sırasında oldukça büyük önem teşkil etmiştir. İran ise aynı dönemde Suriye'ye sağladığı enerji desteğiyle ve Soğuk Savaş sırasında sağladığı askeri destekle önemli rol oynamıştır. Aynı zamanda, bu iki ülke aralarındaki ilişki sayesinde uluslararası aktörler karşısındaki pazarlık güçlerini artırmışlardır. İki ülke arasındaki ilişkinin genel özellikleri 2000'li yıllarda da değişiklik göstermemiştir. Tüm bu noktalar hiç değilse belli bir ölçüde İran ve Suriye'nin politika yapımının ve ulusal çıkarlar çerçevesinde bu politikaların akıllıca ve pragmatik kullanımının genel özellikleri hakkında bir fikir vermektedir.

İki devletten ve Hizbullah gibi devlet-dışı aktörlerden oluşan görece küçük boyutlu İran-Suriye ittifakının bu özelliği bir avantaj halini almış ve iki ülke arasındaki farkların en aza indirgenmesini ve farklı çıkarlar ve farklı duruşlar arasında dengenin bulunmasını kolaylaştırmıştır. Bu durum, her bir üye devletin katkısının daha fazla olması ve daha az uyuşmazlık yaşanması olasılığıyla küçük ittifakların daha etkili olması sebebiyle, bu ittifakı daha uzun süreli ve yaşatılabilir kılmıştır.

Bu tezde alınan tarihi olaylar, İran'ın ve Suriye'nin dış politika prensiplerinin ve duruşlarının son 30 yılı aşkın süredir oldukça tutarlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Her iki ülke de 1979 yılından bu yana, bölgeye yapılacak herhangi bir yabancı müdahaleye karşı düşmanca bir duruş sergilemekte ve ittifak ilişkisine pragmatik yaklaşımlarını korumaktadır. Ayrıca bu ittifakın ana elementi güvenlidir. Bununla birlikte, ekonomik ihtiyaçlar ve bölgesel güç dengelerindeki sıklıkla yaşanan değişiklikler Tahran ve Şam'ın politikalarını uyuşmazlık ve çıkar çatışmaları karşısında dahi ortak düşmanlara, müttefiklere, siyasi ve ekonomik çıkarlara ve dini benzerliklere dayanarak birbirlerine uydurabilmelerini ve yakın ittifak ilişkilerini koruyabilmelerini sağlamıştır.

Aynı şekilde bu çalışmanın farklı yerlerinde birçok kez vurgulandığı üzere, İran ve Suriye'nin tamamlayıcı ancak aynı zamanda farklı çıkarları her iki ülkenin birçok konuda anlaşmaya varabilmesini de kolaylaştırmıştır. Bu minvalde, Tahran ile Şam

arasındaki ilişkiler incelendiğinde, farklı çıkarılara ve farklı durumlar karşısında oynadıkları farklı rollere sahip iki ülke görülmektedir. Buna ek olarak, her iki ülkenin birbirine danışma ve politikalarını koordine etme yetileri bir yana, uyuşmazlıkların ortaya çıkarabileceği çatışma riski de iki ülke için öncelikli alanların (İran için Körfez Bölgesi, Suriye için Doğu Akdeniz Bölgesi) farklı olması sayesinde önemli derecede en aza indirgenmektedir. Birbirlerinin bölgedeki stratejik önemi ve pozisyonlarının farkında olarak, Suriye de İran da hünerli bir şekilde bir yandan kendi çıkarlarını korurken bir yandan da birbirlerinin politikalarını koordine etmeyi ve uyarlamayı başarmışlardır. Arap-İsrail çatışmasında, Suriye'nin çıkarları öne çıkmaktadır ve Suriye İsrail'i kontrol altında tutma rolüne sahiptir. Öte yandan Körfez'in güvenliği söz konusu olduğunda İran, Irak'ın yayılcılığının karşısında durmaktadır. İki ülke bu esasları kabul etmekte ve bu çerçevede hareket etmektedir. Bu nedenle belli bir noktaya kadar İran ve Suriye, duruşlarını uyumlulaştırarak ve birbirlerine danışma ve diyalog yoluyla anlaşmazlık ve çıkar çatışmalarını en aza indirgeyerek müttefiklik ilişkilerini 30 yıldan fazla süredir korumayı başarmıştır. Bu iki gücün temel önceliklerinin farklı olması ve politikalarını uyumlulaştırma yetisi ittifaklarına güç ve sürdürülebilirlik katmıştır.

Tüm bunlara ek olarak, Körfez ve Yakın Doğu'da İsrail'in ve Irak'ın ve Ortadoğu'da ABD'nin elinin zayıflatılması ve etkisiz hale getirilmesi gibi kısıtlı amaçlarla oluşturulmuş bu müttefiklik ilişkisi bu çizgileri belirlenmiş amaçlar sayesinde daha istikrarlı ve uzun süreli olmuştur. Ayrıca savunma amaçlı ittifaklar da saldırı amaçlı ittifaklardan daha güçlü ve sürdürülebilir görülmektedir zira savunma amaçlı ittifaklar rakip ortadan kalktığında ve zafer kazanıldığında genellikle sona ermektedir. Suriye-İran ittifakının İsrail ve Irak'ın etkisiz hale getirilmesi, ABD'nin bölgedeki etkisinin azaltılması gibi temel hedefleri göz önünde bulundurulduğunda oldukça savunma amaçlı olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Yeni ulusal zorlukların ve engellerin yanı sıra varlığını korumaya devam eden bölgesel engeller ve zorluklar da bu müttefikliğin savunmacı yönünün ve iki ülke arasındaki işbirliğinin korunmasına neden olmaktadır. Ancak bu ittifakı sürdürmek için var olan tüm bu sebeplere karşın, bu müttefiklik ilişkisinin de

özellikle Suriye’de yaşanan ayaklanmalarla daha da öne çıkan belli limitleri vardır. Bu uzun soluklu Suriye-İran ittifakının sona ermesine sebep olabilecek olası senaryolar, ortak tehditlerin (bölgedeki ABD varlığı ve İsrail düşmanlığı gibi) ortadan kalkması, halihazırda tartışılmakta olan olası bir İran-ABD anlaşmasının başarıyla sonuçlanması ve Esad rejiminin sona ermesi ve İran karşıtı bir rejimin başa geçmesi şeklinde sıralanabilir. Geçmiş tecrübelerden görüldüğü kadarıyla bunun dışındaki herhangi bir kısa süreli anlaşmazlığın ya da farklı siyasi algıların Suriye-İran ittifakını yakın gelecekte sona erdirmesi pek mümkün görünmemektedir.

Bu çalışmanın ana sonuçlarından bir başkası da ortak tehditlerin ve güvenlik kaygılarının bu ittifakın oluşturulmasında ana rolü oynadığıdır. Yani ortak dış tehditler Tahran-Şam müttefikliğinin çimentosu mahiyetindedir ve bu ittifakı realist yaklaşımın öznesi haline getirmektedir. Söz konusu ittifak, bölgedeki İran ve Suriye aleyhine gelişen denge politikalarına karşı bu iki ülkenin dengeleme politikalarının bir sonucudur. Bu çerçevede, özellikle pan-Arap düzenin sona ermesi ve Sovyetler Birliği’nin yıkılmasının ardından çoğu Arap ülkesinin ABD’ye bağımlılığı artmış ve oluşan güç boşluğunda İran ve Suriye’nin karşı denge politikası izlemesi ve ittifak oluşturması için elverişli bir ortam ortaya çıkmıştır. Uluslararası baskılarla karşılaşıldığında, Suriye İran’a güvenmiş ve bir dönem kısa süreli ABD’nin yanında yer alma çabasının ardından, stratejik dengeleme politikalarında İran’a önemli bir müttefik gözüyle bakmıştır. Buna karşılık olarak, Şam İran için Arap dünyasındaki ve Arap-İsrail meselesindeki dayanak noktası olmuştur. Öte yandan aynı şekilde Hizbullah da her iki ülke için de Lübnan’daki çıkarları ve hedefleri açısından tutunma noktası olmuştur. Bu iki ülke arasında, İran’ın Suriye’ye silah ve mühimmat desteği ve Suriye’nin Hizbullah’a iletilen silahlar için bir koridor işlevi görmesi ile güçlenen bir güvenlik işbirliği söz konusudur. Tüm bunlar, Tahran-Şam ittifakının ve iki ülke arasındaki bağların oldukça stratejik ve önemli bir hal almasını ve iki ülkenin ellerini güçlendirmesi ve tek başlarına yapabileceklerinden daha etkin bir şekilde hareket edebilmesini sağlaması ve uluslararası tecritin etkilerini azaltması sebebiyle vazgeçilmez olmasına neden olmuştur.

İki ülke ilişkilerinin seyri sırasında dengeleme ve güçlü devletlerin yanında yer alma eğilimlerinin yanı sıra, ilişkilerin Suriye ayaklanmalarına denk gelen son döneminde çok yönlü dengeleme (omni-balancing) politikasına da rastlanmaktadır. Çok yönlü dengeleme teorisine göre, liderler hem iç hem de dış tehditler karşısında devletin çıkarları pahasına hayatta kalabilmek ve iktidarlarını koruyabilmek için denge politikası izlemek zorundadırlar. Suriye’de yaşanan ayaklanmalar sırasında Esad rejiminin karşı karşıya kaldığı durum tam da bu teorinin çerçevesine oturmaktadır. Esad uluslararası baskıların yanı sıra ülke içindeki gücünü ve kontrolünü korumaya çalışırken, İran’la olan ittifakı en güvenilir hayat kurtarıcı olarak görülmektedir. Aynı şekilde, Esad’ın hayatta kalması Tahran için de büyük ve stratejik önem teşkil etmektedir. Bu nedenlerle, Esad iç ve dış tehditlere karşın bir dış gücün (İran’ın) desteğinden yararlanmaktadır.

Stratejik bir değerlendirme yapmak gerekirse, bu ittifak her iki ülkenin dünya siyasetinde karşılaştığı izolasyon ve baskılardan korunabilmesinin yolunu açmaktadır. Suriye de İran da uluslararası izolasyonla karşı karşıya kaldıkları dönemler yaşamıştır ve yaşamaktadır. İran, İran-İrak Savaşı sırasında uluslararası alanda Suriye’nin desteği dışında oldukça az destek almıştır. Öte yandan, Suriye de özellikle 2005 yılında gerçekleşen Lübnan Başkanı Hariri’nin suikastı sonrasında hızlı bir şekilde uluslararası alanda izole edilmiştir. Buna ve Beşşar Esad rejiminin 2011 yılında yaşanmaya başlayan ayaklanmaları şiddetli bir şekilde bastırma çabalarına karşın, İran Esad’ı desteklemeyi sürdürmüştür. Ortak düşmanlar söz konusu olduğunda ise Amerikan karşıtı ve Siyonist karşıtı duruş her iki ülkenin de dış politikalarının ayrılmaz birer parçası olmuştur. Her iki ülkenin birbirleriyle olan bağlarını koparması daha fazla bölgesel ve uluslararası izolasyon ve baskıyı getireceği için İran Suriye’yle, Suriye de İran’la olan bağlarını koparmayı göze alamamıştır. Suriye için İran bölgede yeri doldurulamaz bir partnerdir. İran Suriye’ye halihazırda askeri mühimmat ve birçok bölgesel ve uluslararası konuda diplomatik manivela gücü sağlamaktadır. Bunun yanında bu ittifak Şam’ın Hizbullah ve daha önce Hamas’la var olan bağlarını güçlendirmektedir.

Buna ek olarak, ittifakın sona ermesi durumunda hem Suriye hem de İran için bölgede aynı fonksiyonlara ve/veya faydaya sahip bir müttefik bulmak kolay olmayacaktır ve bunun her iki tarafa da bedeli ağır olacaktır. İttifaklar, devletin gücüne katkıda bulunduğu gibi ek caydırma gücü, siyasi ve diplomatik destek, meşruiyet ve stratejik derinlik de sağlar. Bu çerçevede İran ve Suriye aralarındaki bu ittifakı korumak için çaba sarf etmiş ve bunda da uzun süre başarılı olmuşlardır ki 1979'dan beri iki ülke birbirinin bölgedeki tek güvenilir müttefiki olarak kalmıştır.

Hem İran hem de Suriye daha önce de bahsedildiği üzere dış politika bağlamında anti-Siyonist ve Batı karşıtı bir duruşa sahiptir. Her ikisi de ABD hegemonyasına ve etkisine karşı durmayı ve bölgedeki İsrail tehdidini ortadan kaldırmayı hedeflemektedir. İran ittifak ilişkileri kurmayı ve önde gelen tehditlerden olan ABD'yi dengelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca Amerika'nın Suriye ve İran'da rejim değişikliğine yönelik söylem ve istekleri de Tahran ve Şam'ın tehdit algısını şekillendirmekte ve buna karşı ittifak oluşturma eğilimlerini artırmaktadır. Bu minvalde, iki ülke de ABD'nin demokratikleştirme ajandasının bir sonraki hedefi ve ikinci bir Irak olmanın önüne geçebilmek için ellerinden geleni yapmaktadır. Bunun için de aralarındaki ittifakı ABD'nin Ortadoğu'daki etkisini dengelemek için kullanmaktadırlar. Bir şekilde ABD karşıtı anlayış Suriye-İran ittifakının itici güçlerinden biri haline gelmektedir. Bununla birlikte, bu ittifak sayesinde İran, ABD'nin bölgedeki en önemli müttefiklerinden Suudi Arabistan'a da meydan okuma şansını yakalamakta ve bölgedeki etkisini güçlendirebilmektedir. Diğer bir yandan, her iki ülke de anti-Siyonist söylemler kullanmaktadır, fakat iki ülkenin bu konudaki hedefleri nispeten farklılık göstermektedir. Suriye için Golan Tepeleri'nin kaybı en önemli sebepken, İran için bu anti-Siyonist ve İsrail karşıtı söylemler biraz daha Arap dünyasında halkın desteğini sağlamak için kullanılan Amerikan karşıtlığının bir uzantısı şeklindedir. Aynı şekilde Suriye de bu durumu ve söylemleri içerde ve dışarda destek sağlamak için de kullanmaktadır.

Bu iki ülke ayrıca Hizbullah gibi devlet-dışı aktörleri de bu ittifak ilişkisine dahil

etmektedir. Bu çerçevede özellikle de Hizbullah ve Lübnan söz konusu olduğunda her iki ülkenin de ortak bölgesel stratejik çıkarları öne çıkmaktadır. Suriye en önemli politika önceliklerinden biri Lübnan'daki kontrolünü koruyabilmesidir. Birçok katı ulusalcılar dahi Fransızlar tarafından suni bir şekilde Suriye'den ayrılan Lübnan'ı Büyük Suriye'nin bir parçası olarak görmektedir. Lübnan'daki etkisini ve gücünü koruyabilmek için Şam'ın müttefiklere ihtiyacı vardır ve İran tarafından desteklenen Hizbullah da bu amaca oldukça iyi bir şekilde hizmet etmektedir. Lübnan Suriye için oldukça önemlidir ve Suriye karşıtı güçlerin kontrolüne geçmesi istenmeyen bir durumdur. Lübnan'a gelebilecek her türlü zarar Suriye'yi direkt olarak etkileyecektir zira Lübnan diğer komşulara kıyasla tek dost ülkedir –zaman zaman düzelen ilişkilere rağmen bir yanda Türkiye; en büyük düşmanlardan İsrail; Batı yanlısı Ürdün; rakip (özellikle 1963-2003 yılları arasında) Baas yanlısı Irak–. Bunun yanı sıra Beyrut'ta Suriye karşıtı bir yönetimin oluşması halinde ülkedeki Suriyeli sürgünlerinde Suriye karşıtı eylemlere karışması olasılığı tehdit teşkil etmektedir. Dahası, Lübnan Suriye için oldukça önemli bir işgücü kaynağı da oluşturmaktadır. Dolayısıyla Lübnan'ın olası bir kaybı Suriye üzerine ek olarak ekonomik baskılar da getirebilir. Hizbullah'ın Şam ve Tahran'ın ülkedeki destekçisi olması durumu da bu iki ülkenin Lübnan'daki etkisini korumasını sağlamaktadır. Aynı şekilde Suriye de İran için Hizbullah ve Lübnan'a ulaşmada hayati bir öneme sahiptir. İran ayrıca Suriye ve Hizbullah'tan Doğu Akdeniz bölgesine girişte ve İsrail'e karşı bir tehdit oluşturmada da yararlanmaktadır.

Öte yandan, İran'la iyi ilişkiler Suriye'nin Arap ülkeleriyle olan ilişkilerini sıkıntıya sokmaktadır. Baasçılık'ın ana ideoloji olması sebebiyle Suriye Araplarla işbirliğine ihtiyaç duymaktadır ve bu ilişkilerin zarar görmesi zaman zaman Suriye'nin aleyhine sonuçlar doğurmaktadır. Dolayısıyla, Suriyeli yetkililer genellikle Suriye'nin İran'la ilişkilerini tanımlarken bu ilişkiyi ideolojik olmaktan ziyade pragmatik bir ilişki olarak tanımlamakta ve Suriye'nin Arap kökenlerine vurgu yapmaktadırlar. En başından beri bu iki ülkenin ilişkisine ve Suriye'nin İran'ı desteklemesine ilişkin olarak ideolojik ve dini yakınlıklara değinmekten kaçınılmış ve hep pragmatik yönün altı çizilmiştir. Öncelikle

Suriye en büyük ve değişmeyen rakibi Irak karşısında İran'ı desteklemiştir. Buna ek olarak Tahran'la olan ittifakı, Şam'ın Lübnan'daki İran taraftarı Şii güçler aracılığıyla bu ülkedeki kontrolünü korumasını ve kendi tasarladığı düzeni oturtmak için bu güçleri vekil olarak kullanabilmesini sağlamıştır. İran olan desteğiyle, Suriye genel olarak Arap ülkelerinin Irak'ın yanında durma eğilimine ters bir duruş sergilemiştir. İşte bu ilk adımları ve mantığı bile Suriye'nin ideolojik ve kimliksel değerlere göre davranmak yerine pragmatik duruşunun önemli bir göstergesi olmuştur ki aynı duruş İran tarafından da benimsenmiştir.

Suriye ve İran bağımsız şekilde hareket eden ve yönetici elitleri benzer algı ve değerlere sahip iki ülke olmuştur. Her iki ülke de bölgeyi bir bütün olarak görmekte ve ittifaklarının fayda artırıcı ve özellikle ABD'nin bölgedeki etkisini azaltırken kendi ellerini güçlendirmede önemli role sahip olduğuna inanmaktadır. Yani Suriye ve İran ittifaklarının ve dolayısıyla ortak ajandalarının geleceğe yönelik hedeflerine ulaşmada stratejik öneme sahip olduğunun bilincindedirler ve bu çerçevede tereddüt etmeksizin uzun vadeli çıkarlarını kısa vadeli çıkarlarının önüne geçirebilmişlerdir. İki ülke ilişkileri göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, İran Suriye'nin aksine Arap kökenlere sahip olmadığı için hiçbir zaman Arap ulusalcılığının lideri olmak gibi bir kaygı taşımamıştır. Öte yandan, Suriye de İran'ın tam tersine bölgede İslami uyanışın önderliğini üstlenmek gibi bir hedef belirlememiştir. Bu sayede Tahran ve Şam arasındaki bu farklı ideolojiler ve hedefler, her iki ülkenin de temel dış politika unsurunun rejimin hayatta kalması ve ulusal güvenliğin sağlanması olmasına rağmen, herhangi bir rekabet, korku ve endişe ortamının oluşmasının da önüne geçmiştir. Bu çerçevede, İran'ın ana siyasi amaçları, Körfez ilişkilerinde temel bölgesel aktör olmak; Bağdat'ta düşman bir rejiminin oluşmasının önüne geçmek; bölgede İslami hedefleri desteklemektir. Suriye içinse bu hedefler şu şekilde sıralanabilir: İsrail tarafından işgal edilen Golan Tepelerinin geri alınması; Lübnan siyasetinde Suriye'nin çıkarlarına ters düşen politikaların izlenmesinin önüne geçebilmek adına en azından veto yetkisine sahip olunması; Arap çıkarlarının desteklenmesi.

Konu ideolojiye geldiğinde ise, Ortadoğu’da siyasi rejimlerin ideolojiyi içerde ve dışarda kendi güçlerini ve etkilerini artırmak için kullanması alışılmış bir durumdur. Bölgedeki ittifak tecrübeleri, müttefikler aynı ideolojiye sahip olduklarında ittifaktan yararlanma ve ittifakı koruma eğiliminde olmaktadır ya da geç bu ülkeler arasında liderliği ele geçirmek için bir rekabet ortamının oluştuğunu göstermektedir. Bunun yanı sıra, her bir üye devletler meşru lider ve yönetici vasfına sahip olduğunu ileri sürmekte ve bu durum karşısında tek bir şemsiye altında siyasi birlik oluşturulabilmesi adına müttefiklerinin kendi bağımsızlıklarından ve haklarından vazgeçmelerini talep etmektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu tür aynı ideoloji ve hedefleri paylaşan bir ya da birden fazla bölgesel ülke arasındaki ittifak oluşturma çabaları özellikle Ortadoğu’da kısa süreli işbirliği çabalarından öteye geçememektedir. Kısacası, bölgesel eğilimler göz önünde bulundurulduğunda İran ve Suriye’nin farklı ideolojilere sahip olması bu ittifakın diğer bölgesel oluşumların aksine uzun soluklu ve sürdürülebilir olmasını sağlamıştır. Suriye-İran örneğinde de görüldüğü üzere ittifakın belirli bir doktrinsel anlayış ve ideoloji ile şekillendirilmemiş olması halinde müttefikler arası rekabet olasılığı en aza indirgenmiş ve dolayısıyla birlikte hareket edebilme, uzlaşma ve sorun ve farklılıkları uyumlulaştırma olasılığı artırılmış olmaktadır.

İran ve Suriye farklı karakterlere sahip iki ülkedir. İran İslami devrim yanlısı ve Fars kültürüne sahipken, Suriye seküler, sosyalist eğilimli Arap yanlısı bir ideolojiye sahiptir. Bu iki ideoloji uzlaşmaz gibi görünse de her iki rejim de bölgesel konular ekseninde ortak bir tabanda buluşmayı başarmıştır. Devrimci İran Batı, Mısır, Irak ve İsrail karşısıyla öne çıktıkça, bu ülkeyle kurulacak iyi ilişkiler Suriye’nin bölgesel güç dengesini kendi lehine çevirebilmesi için realist bir şans olmuştur. Buna ek olarak, Suriye Lübnanlı Şiiiler üzerindeki etkisini koruyabilmek zorundaydı ve bunu sağlayabilmek için İran’la iyi ilişkilerin korunması ve İran’ın desteği önemli bir anahtardı. Öte yandan İran özellikle İslam Devrimi’nin ardından yeni müttefiklere ihtiyaç duymaktaydı. Şii teokratik rejim, seküler ve Arap milliyetçisi Suriye Baas Partisi ile temel farklılıklara sahip olsa dahi iki ülkenin çıkarları bu farklılıkların önüne

geçmiştir. Baasçı Suriye'nin kurucusu olan Hafız Esad ve onun halefi Beşşar Esad Şiiliğin Alevilik hizbinden olsalar da Suriye ve İran arasındaki ikili ilişkiler dini benzerliklerden ziyade genel olarak ortak çıkarlar üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır. Suriye İran-Irak Savaşı sırasında diğer Arap ülkelerinin aksine İran'la ittifak kurmuştur. İki ülke İsrail'e karşı güçlerini birleştirmiştir. İran Suriye aracılığıyla Hizbullah'a destek sağlamayı başarmıştır. Tahran da Şam da birbirlerine olan destekleriyle ABD'nin kendilerine karşı baskısını hafifletmeyi başarmıştır. Bu ittifakı sona erdirmeye çabalarına karşın iki ülke birbirine daha da yakınlaşmış ve ittifaklarını güçlendirmiştir. Dolayısıyla, ideoloji ve din konusunda, yönetici elitler farklı hiziplere üye olmakla birlikte Şii olsalar da bu durum iki ülke arasındaki ilişkilerin iyi ya da kötü yönde ilerlemesine direkt katkıda bulunmamıştır. Bunun yerine ortak çıkar ve duruşlar ittifakı güçlendiren temel etmenler olmuştur.

Mezhepsel ideoloji ve kimlik konusu incelendiğinde, Esad rejiminin çok mezhepli ve Alevilerin çoğunlukla olduğu bir rejim içinde mezhepsel politikaları tamamıyla göz ardı etmesi çok da olası değildir. Açıkçası, Alevilerin dominant olduğu bu yapı Suriye'nin İran'la ittifak kurmasını kolaylaştırmıştır fakat aynı zamanda bu durum Suriye'nin Sünni bazlı halk desteğini de riske atmaktadır. Ayrıca eğer Suriye'deki rejim Sünni olsaydı, İran'la ittifakı ne avantaj getirirse getirsin çok daha riskli ve tehlikeli olacaktı. Yine de Suriye rejimi Alevi toplumu büyük Suriye Arap halkının bir parçası olarak görmekte ve tanımlamaktadır ve Alevilerin çıkarlarını Suriye Baas Devleti ve Arap ulusunun çıkarlarıyla birleştirmektedir. Alevi ve Sünniler arasında net bir çizgi çizmek ve İran'la ittifakın sebeplerinden biri olarak mezhepsel yakınlığa dikkat çekmek, Suriye rejiminin istikrarını tehlikeye sokacaktır. Daha Lübnan ve Irak'ta sekülerizmi destekleyen ve seküler ve çok mezhepli yapının iç içe geçmesi gerektiğinin savunan bir anlayışta olduğu için Esadlar döneminde Suriye politikasında revizyonist dini kavramlara herhangi bir vurgu yapılmamıştır. Aynı şekilde, bu ittifakın oluşturulmasında mezhepsel yöne açık bir şekilde hiçbir zaman vurgu yapılmamıştır. Bu noktada, ortak çıkarlar, ülke içinde, bölgede ve uluslararası alanda bu ittifakı teşvik eden bir atmosferin olması, bu

ittifakın avantaj ve gereklilikleri Suriye-İran ittifak stratejisinin ana sebeplerini oluşturmaktadır ve bu çerçevede dini dayanışmanın ve yakınlığın büyük bir etkisi kalmamaktadır. Daha önce de belirtildiği gibi bu ittifak güvenlik bazlı nedenlerin öne çıktığı realist varsayımlarla uyuşan pragmatik bir müttefiklik ilişkisi olarak görülmektedir.

Her ne kadar zaman zaman Suriye İran'ın Şiiliği yayma çabaları içerisinde bir araç gibi görülmüşse de bu mezhepsel bağlar her zaman tartışılmış ancak ittifakın oluşturulma sebeplerinden biri olduğu gibi bir varsayım dile getirilmemiştir. Ama bu durum Suriye'deki ayaklanmaların ardından değişmiş ve mezhepsel kimlik faktörü açık bir şekilde dile getirilmeye başlanmıştır. Bu tezin dördüncü bölümünde incelendiği üzere, Esad rejimi güç kaybettiğinde mezhepsel argümanlar daha da sıklıkla gündeme getirilmeye başlanmış ve ülkede oluşan yeni güç boşluğunu fırsat bilen farklı aktörler de bu krizin içine dahil olmuşlardır. Böylesi bir ortam tüm bölgesel aktörlerin durumdan kendi lehlerine faydalanmalarını olası kılmıştır. Dolayısıyla bu ittifakın mezhepsel boyutu da İran ve Esad'ın mezhepsel dinamiklere göre hareket eden aktörler olduğunu göstermek ve bu iki gücü bölgesel güç dengesinin dışında bırakabilmek için daha sesli bir şekilde dile getirilmeye başlamıştır. Fakat bu dönemde ve böyle bir durum için dahi aslında bu müttefiklik ilişkisinin temelinde yatan itici güçlerin mezhepsel dinamiklerden ziyade güvenlik bazlı olduğu görülmektedir.

İniş ve çıkışlarına rağmen, genel olarak bakıldığında bu ittifak ilişkisi Tahran ve Şam arasında dengeli bir bağımlılık ilişkisini de beraberinde getirmiştir. Örneğin İran-Irak Savaşı sırasında, İran Suriye'ye ve onun desteğine daha bağımlıyken daha sonraki süreçte yaşanan İsrail'in 1982'de Lübnan'ı işgali Suriye'nin İran'a bağımlılığı gözle görülür derecede artırmış ve İran'ın Suriye'ye desteği iki ülke arasındaki ilişkiyi dengelemiştir. Bunu takip eden dönemlerde de iki ülke arasındaki ittifak ve bağımlılık ilişkisi dengeli bir yön izlemiştir. Ancak bu denge Suriye'deki ayaklanmaların başlamasıyla asimetrik bir hal almış ve bölgesel ve uluslararası alanda destek bulamayan

Esad rejimi İran'dan gelecek yardıma ve desteğe oldukça bağımlı bir hale gelmiştir. Fakat bu sefer daha öncekilerden farklı olarak bu asimetrikleşen ilişki her iki ülkeyi de riskli bir pozisyona sokmuştur zira Suriye'de meydana gelebilecek herhangi bir rejim değişikliği bu ittifakın ve İran'ın avantajlı durumunun sonunun gelmesi anlamına gelebilir.

Sonuç olarak tüm bu etkenler birlikte göz önünde bulundurulduğunda Suriye ve İran arasındaki bu ittifakın oluşturulmasının kaçınılmaz bir sonuç olduğu ve bu kadar uzun süreli olmasının şaşırtıcı bir durum olmadığı görülmektedir. Böylesi iç içe geçmiş ve farklı aktörlerin, uluslararası, bölgesel ve ülke içi durumların rol oynadığı bir bölgede, ortak çıkarlar ve belli ölçülerde ortak inançların birleşmesi Suriye ve İran'ı bir araya getirmiş ve ittifaklarını güçlü, fonksiyonel ve uzun soluklu hale getirebilmelerinin temelini oluşturmuştur. Ancak an itibarıyla Suriye'nin iç durumu bu ittifakın geleceğini ve iki ülke için olumlu seyreden yönünü tehlikeye atmakta gibi görünmektedir.

Ortadoğu istisnai olarak görebileceğimiz böylesi uzun soluklu ve etkili bir ittifak ilişkisine şahit olmuştur. Şimdi sorulması gereken sorulardan biri, bu tür faktörler bir araya geldiğinde benzer bir ittifak yapısının farklı ülkeler arasında tekrar ortaya çıkıp çıkmayacağıdır. Aynı şekilde akıllara gelen bir başka soru ise Esad iktidarda kaldığında ya da bu rejim sona erdiğinde bu iki ülkenin müttefiklik ilişkisini hala koruyup koruyamayacağıdır. Yalnızca zaman ve olayların seyri bize bu soruların cevaplarını getirebilecek gibi görünmektedir.

B. TEZ FOTOKOPİSİ İZİN FORMU

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Adı : GAMZE

Bölümü : ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER

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TEZİN TÜRÜ : Yüksek Lisans

Doktora

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