

DOES ANKARA READ THE CARDS OF THE HANDS OF STRANGE BEDFELLOWS?

The essay focuses on the development of the enduring alliance between Syria and Iran which dates back to almost three decades ago. The author attempts to examine the Syrian-Iranian alliance within the context of regional politics and international developments. She later argues unless there is a regime change in Tehran and/or Damascus, Syria and Iran will be dependent on their alliance to further their geopolitical interests in the future. The author believes the regimes in Damascus and Tehran present a challenge to Turkey. Finally the essay critically examines Turkey's position towards Tehran and Damascus.

Özgül Erdemli*

* Özgül Erdemli is a member of the ARI Movement and the Managing Editor of Turkish Policy Quarterly. She holds an MA from the London School of Economics. She has specialized on Middle East politics and currently is working on US-Turkey relations. ozgul@ari.org.tr

The Middle East is characterized by a number of bitter conflicts, periodic warfare, shifting alliances, and general instability. The region is a laboratory for the study of alliances and alignments, understood as a “formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.”¹ Work on Middle Eastern alliances falls into two broad empirical categories: studies of alliances among regional powers and studies of alliances between regional states and the great powers. This study will focus on one example of the former category, namely the Syrian-Iranian alliance. It will, then, analyze how Turkey positions itself regarding the close ties and relations between Damascus and Tehran.

As for the theoretical framework of the study, this essay takes Stephen Walt’s debate as the starting point, i.e. his assertion that Middle Eastern alliances are not unique, that they can be comprehended by theoretically generalizable, neo-realist principles. He shows that in the Middle East balancing behavior predominates. Walt also underplays the importance of transnational ideologies like Pan-Arabism and political Islam. He concludes that ideology is not a central motivation for alliance behavior and emphasizes threat and balancing behavior.²

Similarly Hinnebusch and Ehteshami argue that Syrian and Iranian foreign policies are driven not by ideological worldviews but by conventional ones, i.e. realist diplomacy with their pursuance of a balance of power and spheres of influence.³ Given the dissimilarity of the two regimes, abovementioned authors look at the systemic factors to explain the logic of the alliance. Like any state, Syria and Iran pursue their foreign policies in a way which suits their national interests and security concerns. Geo-strategic considerations have been the primary motive behind Damascus-Tehran ties and ideology has played only a complementary role. Thus the rational actor model for both countries seems the best explanatory model to explain their relations. The critical question as far as this essay is concerned is whether or not Ankara pursues its foreign policy with Syria and Iran in accordance with the rational actor model.

The relations between Damascus and Tehran have been named an alliance frequently, not only by outside observers but also by policy makers in both countries. On the surface, the Syrian-Iranian alliance is a puzzling relationship. The Syrian secular, pan-Arab vision of an ‘Arab integrated nation’ seems incompatible with the Iranian goal of creating a ‘unified Islamic world.’ While the experts argued that the two visions are destined to clash, because the Syrian-Iranian alliance has provided tangible and ideological benefits to both countries, the relationship has proved to be more durable than other alliances in the Middle East. The most important factor for the continuation of this alliance has been each side’s need to increase its balancing behavior and to decrease the perceived military and ideological threats.

The first converging factor in the Damascus-Tehran relations is their anti-Western (especially anti-American) stance and anti-Zionism. By creating an Arab-Islamic bloc, Iran and Syria aimed to counter the American hegemonic influences in the region and to counter the Israeli threat, as they perceived it.

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) can be considered the most critical stage in the Syrian-Iranian relations as Syria’s siding with Iran against Iraq led to the institutionalization of their

¹ M. Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987) p.1.

² Walt (1987).

³ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.3, pp.87-88, pp. 201-203.

relationship and its turn into an alliance. Both Syria and Iran gained from this alliance during the war. Syria's support of Iran during the war offers a classic example of the balance of power. Syria's interests were enhanced through its alliance with Iran.⁴ Historically there has always been a rivalry between Iraq and Syria as they both struggled for regional dominance.⁵

Although the relationship between a secular Arab nationalist and an Iranian Shiite fundamentalist regime might have had something to do with the fact that Hafez Assad came from Syria's sub-Shia Alawite minority, from his view it was primarily a strategic alliance. An alliance with Iran based on sectarian solidarity, in driving a wedge between the Alawi elite and the Sunni majority in Syria, would have been counter-productive from the point of regime stability. As Marschall argues, the geopolitical and strategic advantages of the alliance are enough to explain the Damascus-Tehran ties without resorting to religious motives or sectarian solidarity.⁶

Iranian and Syrian interests in Lebanon converged for different reasons than their interests in Iraq. It should be noted, however, that it was in Lebanon where Damascus and Tehran's interests were at odds more than their interests in Iraq. The Shia clergy in Iran had an interest in the Shia population of Lebanon even before the Iranian revolution. Thus, it was natural that Iranian advocates of exporting revolution turned their attention to the Shia community of Lebanon after 1979. Analyzing the political situation in Lebanon in 1979 and 1980, Shia clergy believed the country was ripe for achieving an Islamic revolution and that conditions were also favorable for wiping Israel off the map and recreating Palestine. Syria, however did not want an Islamic republic in Lebanon. This is why Syria supported AMAL.⁷ Nevertheless, Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982 provided a common ground between Syria and Iran. Iran's offer of active support contrasted sharply with the silence of the rest of the Arab world and confirmed the value of the Iranian link to the Syrians.⁸ To the extent that the interests of Syria and Hizbullah (or Iran for that matter) in tactical regional issues converged, coordination between the two became possible and desirable. Hizbullah, however, had an agenda of its own, which clashed fundamentally with Syria's plans for the future of Lebanon.⁹

⁴ Jubin Goodarzi, "The Syrian-Iranian Axis: An Enduring Entente?" *Middle East International*, No.522 (1996).

⁵ Both countries harboured dissidents who wanted to overthrow one another's regime. Iraq supported the internal challenge to the Damascus regime, i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood revolt, and Syria supported the Kurds in northern Iraq.

⁶ Christin Marschall, "Syria-Iran: A Strategic Alliance, 1979-1991," *Orient*, Vol.33, No.2, pp.440-46.

⁷ Shia cleric Musa Sadr launched the *Harakat al-mahrumin* (Movement of the Deprived) in 1974. The group, better known by the name of its militia *Amal* (Hope) gained political prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By 1975, Amal had become a Lebanese tool of the Syrian policy in Lebanon. AMAL wanted political integration of the Shia community within a pluralistic state and regarded the Iranian vision of Islamic revolution as inappropriate for Lebanon.

⁸ Husayn J. Agaha and Ahmad S. Khalidi, *Syria and Iran: Rivalry and Cooperation*, p.15-16.

⁹ In late 1980s, Syrian-Iranian relations faced a number of crises exemplified by the 'war of the camps,' a protracted conflict between Hizbullah and Amal during which Syria and Iran supported opposing sides. But in the end Iran and Syria put their differences aside and cosponsored the 'Damascus Settlement' between the two movements allowing a Hizbullah presence in the south. See Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997), p.131-34. After the Damascus Settlement, Syria was able to control Hizbullah to a large extent and used it against Israel for its ends. Hizbullah exerted pressure on Israel in a way that suited both Damascus and Tehran. Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 was interpreted as the victory of Hizbullah against Israel, and Syria and Iran claimed credit for this.

It can be claimed that one of the most severe tests of the alliance occurred over Lebanon in late 1980s, as competition and frictions between the two powers and their proxies circumscribed Tehran-Damascus cooperation. The allies, however, managed not to jeopardize their interests and the alliance survived despite some serious problems. The Syrian-Iranian alliance was instrumental in increasing the impact of the Lebanese resistance. Assad's alliance with Iran bolstered his standing with the Shi'a in Lebanon which were useful proxies in Assad's attempts to fashion a Lebanon in which Syria's interests were observed. And Tehran's alliance with Syria helped Iran to challenge Western influence in Lebanon and to establish relations with the Shi'a movement outside its borders. Without Syrian toleration, it is doubtful that Iran could establish a presence in Lebanon. Furthermore the alliance facilitated Iranian access to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Syria joined the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq. One could argue that it was natural for Syria to be against Iraq this time too, as weakening or toppling Saddam Hussein or neutralizing his capacity to threaten Syria has been one of the main strategic goals of Damascus (President Hafez Assad's Ba'athist regime was a fierce opponent of the Iraqi Ba'athists and Syria supported Iran against its war with Iraq). What was not natural, though, was how Syria changed its strategy to achieve its goal, i.e. allying itself with the U.S. Syrian policy and action were contrary to the revolutionary, pioneering regime struggling against imperialism and Zionism and dedicated to achieving the goal of all-Arab unification.¹⁰ Furthermore, Syria hinted that even if Israel retaliated against Iraq, it would remain hostile to Saddam.¹¹ This shows that Syria put its anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist ideology aside to pursue its national security objective regarding the Iraqi threat.

Considering that one of the common elements in the Syrian-Iranian alliance was their anti-Western and anti-Israel stance, one would assume that a dramatic change of policy by one side would not have been digested so easily by the other and would have caused a problem in terms of the logic of their relationship. It is true that Iran was critical of Syria's role in facilitating the Western intervention and the Syrian deployment of troops alongside the American troops, but at the same time Tehran welcomed the possibility of the Iraqi threat removed by other countries including the U.S. It can be claimed that the anti-Iraq coalition was a blessing in disguise for Tehran as Iran could not be sure that Saddam would not again turn his attention to Iran after consolidating his power in Kuwait. Through Syria, Tehran could maintain an indirect foothold in the anti-Saddam coalition without taking any risks itself.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the U.S. became the only superpower trying to impose its vision in the world, including the Middle East. The Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 was a consequence of the change in the world order, and Syria's participation in the conference signified Damascus' partial adjustment to the new order. Lacking Soviet support Syria could not consider the war option seriously any more to recapture the Golan Heights which were lost to Israel in the 1967 War.

In light of Tehran's staunch opposition to any U.S. presence in the region and its virulent antipathy toward Israel, Iran opposed the peace process from its inception. The peace process and the initial Syrian involvement in it led to a divergence of interests between the two states. Tehran was opposed to the peace process and Syria's participation ideologically, but on a

¹⁰ Eyal Zisser, *Assad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (New York University Press, 2001), p.50.

¹¹ Quoted by Amatzia Baram, "Syria: Iraq's Radical Nemesis" and Barry Rubin, *Iraq's Road to War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p.185.

more practical level not being part of the new order, it could not afford to break the ties with Syria, as it would have meant more isolation in the region and in the world.

From 1993 onwards, it appeared that Iran would accept Damascus signing a peace treaty with Israel without changing its opposition to the peace process.¹² Syria, on the other hand, still appreciated the value of her relationship with Iran as it facilitated Syrian self-confidence in negotiations with Israel. It can be argued that the Syrian-Iranian alliance survived the most challenging event of the last decade, i.e. the peace process and deepened in a sense with the formalization of some agreements.¹³ Furthermore, given the failure of the Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations in March 2000 and the condition of the peace process since the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000, the peace process has become a less dividing factor in the Syrian-Iranian alliance.

The Syrian-Iranian relations have been characterized by an unusual combination of political rivalry and pragmatic cooperation, as there are many common and conflicting elements in their policies. Despite their different views and policies on many issues, Syria and Iran have managed to overcome those barriers and keep their alliance intact for almost three decades. Their alliance is the longest enduring one in the Middle East generally known for its shifting alliances.

There is reason to believe that Tehran-Damascus alliance might survive in the future to the extent that they will retain or create mutual interests and areas of cooperation. Even though Syria participated in the peace process in 1991, both Syria and Iran oppose the American new world order, both of them are interested in building up a significant military capability to deter any threat including development of WMD,¹⁴ both are interested in keeping their sphere of influence in Lebanon despite the fact that Syria withdrew its troops from Lebanon in 2005. Syrian troops are no longer based in Lebanon, however this does not mean the influence of Damascus over Beirut waned completely. As Gary Gambill argues “[t]he backbone of Syria’s (Syrian or Syria’s?) power in Lebanon –its intelligence– has merely gone underground. The assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Hariri in February and the murders of prominent dissidents Samir Kassir and George Hawi in June suggest that Syria remains capable as ever of murdering dissidents and fomenting violence if developments in Lebanon do not go its way.”¹⁵

Furthermore, both Syria and Iran oppose Israeli domination of the Middle East, and in the mid 1990s both had an interest to contain Turkey. Though condemned by the whole Arab world, the Turkish-Israeli relations raised tensions mostly with Iran and Syria, because Iran and Syria weighed heavily in Turkish and Israeli threat perceptions.¹⁶ For Tehran and

¹² Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997), p.107.

¹³ ‘Higher Syrian-Iranian Joint Committee’ was formed to ensure policy cooperation between Syria and Iran in virtually every area. See “Syria’s Strategic Alliance with Iran Reveals Both Nations’ True Mideast Intentions,” *The Center for Security Policy*, No.92-D 137 (November 1992).

¹⁴ It was reported that a joint Syrian-Iranian working committee on nuclear weapons development and strategy was established in January 1992. See “The Iraq Syndrome: Bush Administration Ignores, Facilitates Syrian Arms Build-Up,” *The Center for Security Policy*, No.92-D 111 (September 1992). For more updated information about the Iranian quest of nuclear power see Kaveh Afrasiabi and Mustafa Kibaroglu, “Negotiating Iran’s Nuclear Populism,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol.12, No.1 (Summer-Fall 2005).

¹⁵ Gary C. Gambill, “Hooked on Lebanon,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.12, No.4 (Fall 2005), p.35.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive analysis of Turkish-Israeli relations see Efraim Inbar, *The Israeli-Turkish Entente* (London: King’s College Mediterranean Studies, 2001). For the Turkish translation of the book see Efraim Inbar, “Türk-İsrail Stratejik Ortaklığı” (Ankara: ASAM Yayınları, 2002), translated by Özgül Erdemli and Suna Ercan.

Damascus their alliance has served as a countervailing weight against Israel and Turkey. Common security interests have affected the Tehran-Damascus ties.

An overview of the Syrian-Iranian relations indicates that the net result of the almost three-decade-old-relationship has been mostly a stable one. Tehran and Damascus have been able to assess the benefits and limitations of their ties in a realistic manner and survived the strains of central issues like the Lebanon or the peace process. It can be claimed that both Iran and Syria played their Syrian and Iranian cards (neyi kastettigin cok anlasılmıyor- belki “respectively” eklemek biraz clarify eder) with great skills given the major changes which took place in the region especially in the last decade and in the aftermath of 9/11 despite the American efforts to sever the Tehran-Damascus ties.¹⁷ Many critical stages have been overcome by the calculated policies of the Iranian and Syrian leaders in the past twenty-seven years. Provided that there will be no regime change disrupting their former policies, there is reason to believe the Syrian-Israeli ties will survive in the years to come. For the continuation of the close ties and close cooperation between Syria and Iran, strategic concerns of Damascus and Tehran should remain the same or new common strategic concerns should come into play. It is observed that the major events of the past decade (such as the Gulf war, the peace process, the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon), and major events of the current decade (such as 9/11, Iraq war, Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza) have not changed the basic pillars of the Syrian-Iranian alliance and unless there is a regime change in Tehran and/or Damascus, we can speculate that Damascus and Tehran would still be dependent on their alliance to further their geopolitical interests in the future.

What is of significant concern from the point of view of Ankara is how the unlikely yet rather stable alliance of Tehran and Damascus presents a challenge to Turkey which has borders with both Syria and Iran. In the introduction, I argued that Stephan Walt’s assertions can be applied to Tehran-Damascus alliance in that balancing behavior has dominated the calculations of authorities both in Iran and Syria. Consequently ideology has not been the central motivation for the alliance behavior of Iranian and Syrian rulers, but threat and balancing behavior have. The critical question, as far as this essay is concerned is, whether or not Turkish rulers calculate their strategies for both countries based on such factors. Related to this, the second question should be whether or not Ankara currently perceives any threat from Syria and Iran and whether or not Ankara has attempted to balance Tehran and Damascus.

It is important to underline that Turkey has always had complex relations with these two neighboring countries. Political and security issues related to Turkey’s threat assessment mainly have centered on PKK terrorism and often conflicting approaches to the Islamist question. What is not clear however is whether the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*- Justice and Development Party) government positions itself with regard to Damascus and Tehran separately or also assesses the implications of strange bedfellows in its foreign and security policy considerations. I believe Ankara does not see the cards of the hands of Damascus and Tehran in a game with two players or three and more. Wishful thinking seems to blur the eyes of the AKP rulers and despite the smoking gun, Ankara prefers to ignore all the signs and naively hope things remain the same. This is partly related with AKP government’s preference of the *status quo ante* in the neighboring countries including Syria, Iran, Iraq,

¹⁷ For more on Iranian policy in the aftermath of 9/11, see Kaveh Afrasiabi and Abbas Maleki, “Iran’s foreign policy since September 11,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* (Summer 2003). (article adının kelimelerinin basharfleri capital olmalı mı?)

Azerbaijan and Georgia. To limit our focus on the first two countries mentioned above, one has to remember how the Turkish government remained silent after the Hariri assassination in Lebanon and how it reacted rather late to the international pressure exerted on Damascus to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. Regarding Iran, once again the AKP government behaved as if everything was the same and did not join the highly vocal international condemnation of Iranian quest for nuclear power.

Iran has constantly claimed that Tehran's nuclear plans are only for peaceful electricity generation. But it is well known that the country hid potentially arms-related technology from a U.N. nuclear watchdog for 18 years. Iran's desire to become a "nuclear weapons-capable state" is not only put forward by the U.S.- EU and international organizations such as the UN, and IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency),¹⁸ but even some Iranian diplomats, scholars, and scientists accepts that "Iran wants to join the Nuclear Club."¹⁹

Although some of the security elite of Turkey have begun to worry about Iranian actions, Iran's nuclear program seems not to have raised similar concerns among the government circles.²⁰ **Turkey's Ambassador to the U.S. Faruk Loğoğlu** (former diye eklemeli if he is no longer) is among the very few high ranking Foreign Ministry officials who pointed to the serious threat of Iran's nuclear plans. When he was **still Turkey's Ambassador** (better ifade?) Loğoğlu stated, "In my view, Iran is irreversibly bent on having nuclear weapons"²¹ and called for the launching of direct dialogue between Washington and Tehran on the matter.

There is no doubt that Iran's nuclear program would affect Turkey, therefore Ankara's low key approach to this serious issue is hard to understand. Either Turkish decision makers' low threat perceptions are based on some facts which the UN, EU and the IAEA *are not aware of*, or Turkey's threat and balancing behavior *is not in accordance* with the rational actor model. It would be critical to find out what model Ankara applies to its foreign policy making regarding the Syrian-Iranian alliance (and other Middle East countries for that matter) to understand Turkey's relations with its neighboring countries.

To conclude, it seems Ankara is incapable of reading, and more importantly understanding, the cards of the strange bedfellows, i.e. Damascus and Tehran, which leads to miscalculations and misperceptions in Turkish foreign policy. Misperceptions of the other players' actions in

¹⁸ EU-3 (the trio of Britain, France and Germany) began holding talks with Iran on Iranian nuclear program in October 2003 which culminated in the Paris Agreement of November 2004. Regarding IAEA's position on nuclear developments in Iran check the official website of the organization (www.iaea.org) and see the press release titled "IAEA Chief Meets with Iran Secretary," 26 August 2005. For further reading see Miriam Rajkumar and Joseh Cirincione, "The IAEA's Report on Iran, No Slam Drunk," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (September 2004).

¹⁹ Afrasiabi and Kibaroglu (2005). For an assessment of Iran's nuclear program also see Mustafa Kibaroglu, "An Assesment of Iran's Nuclear Program," *The Review of International and Strategic Affairs* (Spring 2002), Vol.1, No.3.

²⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the issue, see the Summer 2004 issue of *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (TPQ) for the following articles: Ian Lesser, "Turkey, Iran and Nuclear Risks," *TPQ*, (Summer 2004), Vol.3 No.2; and Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Turkey's Sweet and Sour Policy Against NBC Weapons," *TPQ* (Summer 2004), Vol.3 No.2. Also see Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Iran's Nuclear Program May Trigger the Youg Turks to Think Nuclear," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Proliferation Analysis*, 20 December 2004.

²¹ "Loğoğlu calls for Iran-US talks," *Turkish Daily News*, 21 December 2005.

a poker game and miscalculations based on those can lead one to lose the game, but in the realm of foreign policy misperceptions and miscalculations can lead to grave mistakes which cannot be afforded.