Book Review:

**Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East**


Reviewed by Mohammad Ataie

The decade of the 1980s, the formative years of the Iranian-Syrian alliance, was the most crucial and decisive stage of the Damascus-Tehran relationship. Rapid developments in bilateral ties, grave regional developments such as the Iran-Iraq war and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and a fierce political factionalism inside the Islamic Republic which greatly impacted Iranian foreign policy, makes this period stand out in the 30 year-old alliance.

This alliance, and its regional ramifications for Lebanon and Iraq, has been subjected to extensive academic research and journalistic writings. However, an in-depth analysis based on primary sources, which investigates the origins of Syrian-Iranian relations in the formative 1980s, has been absent. Jubin Goodarzi’s *Syria and Iran* is a response to this void.

The 1980s was not only the period of alliance formation. It also marked the most difficult and complicated stage of the newly created Syrian-Iranian axis. Between 1985 and 1988, major tensions between Damascus and Tehran over the continuation of the Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic Republic’s policy in Lebanon, the Camp Wars, and Amal-Hezbollah rivalries put the alliance to a difficult test. By focusing on a critical stage of Iranian-Syrian relations, *Syria and Iran* provides the reader with a meticulous chronology and an in-depth analysis of the origin of the two countries’ relations from the 1979 Iranian revolution to end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988.

Goodarzi is trying to shed light on the nature of the contradiction and differences that surfaced between the two regimes, and so he seeks to answer a central question: how the relationship was able to survive all the divergences and conflicts of interest and turned into a lasting alliance that has affected Middle Eastern politics for three decades. To address this, he has used a wide range of Arabic, English, French and Persian newspaper archives to render a detailed story of developments during this period.

Goodarzi distinguishes three phases in the evolution of the alliance between Damascus and Tehran and explains their significance in terms of their effect on bilateral relations and their regional implications. The first phase is the 1979-82 emergence of the alliance, covered in the first chapter. The second phase is 1982-85, which starts from the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. This is a period of achievements and limits of the Syrian-Iranian power and is addressed in the second chapter. The third phase covers 1985 to the summer of 1988, when the Iraq-Iran war ended. The third chapter (p.p.133-285) deals with this tumultuous stage of the alliance, which is marked with bilateral tensions. This chapter demonstrates how the partnership between the two countries was able to survive numerous tensions it faced by both the Iran-Iraq War and developments in Lebanon and “how the two allies were able to delineate the parameters of their cooperation and forge understandings on how to perpetuate their partnership for many years to come” (p.285).

The author approaches these three stages by emphasizing the inter-connection of regional developments. For example, he relates the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon to the Iranian achievements in the war front against Iraq and explains its significance for the consolidation of Tehran-Damascus axis. Hence, he discusses the decisions that were made in 1982 in Damascus, Baghdad, Tel Aviv and Tehran to show how
events in the Iran-Iraq war front and the Islamic Republic’s recapturing the invaded territories in the spring of 1982 affected the timing of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (p.p. 59-67).

Goodarzi bases his findings on books, official government statements, periodicals and newspapers. Through extensive research and analysis, he tries to put various pieces, accounts, interviews and articles from such sources together “to shed new light on linkages between major events and crucial decisions that were made in Tehran and Damascus” (p.6). However, this has not been an easy job.

Since the relationship between Damascus and Tehran has always been covered in extreme secrecy, most accounts in the newspapers and magazines on bilateral talks are either inaccurate or deal only with the formalities of the bilateral relations. This has complicated Goodarzi’s attempt to provide an accurate picture of the nature of the ties between the Islamic Republic and Baathist Syria. Consequently many accounts in the book concerning communications and decisions made between Iranian and Syrian officials are based on speculation.

Interviewing figures who have been part of the formation of the Iranian-Syrian axis could have filled this void; however, Goodarzi describes Syrian and Iranian officials as inaccessible (p.4). This has been despite the fact that several key people who played a significant role in the relationship and many others who have been involved in different stages of relations in Syria, Lebanon and Iran have been approachable for interviews on the subject. Sheikh Sobhi Tofeili, the first secretary general of Hezbollah, Ali Akbar Mohtashami-pour, the former ambassador to Damascus, who played a pivotal role in creating the ties between Tehran and Damascus in the 1980s, Mahmoud Hashemi Rafsanjani who was in charge of the Syrian and Lebanese files at the Iranian foreign ministry from 1980 till 2001, Rifat al-Assad, the influential figure in the Ba’ath regime in Syria till 1984 and Abdul Halim Khaddam, the Syrian former vice president who had fled from the country in 2005, are examples among many other figures that could have been approached for such a scholarly work.

Another weakness of the book is that the author’s main emphasis is on “the output and policies that emerged from the black box of Syrian-Iranian decision making” (p. 6) rather than focusing on the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy decision making inside both regimes. As a result, the book’s narrative is mostly limited to the official level of the alliance. This focus on the outputs has downplayed the significance of factionalism inside the Islamic Republic, during different stages of power struggle between 1979-90, on the international role of the revolution and its ramifications for the Islamic Republic’s ties with Syria and its role in Lebanon.

For instance while discussing “the new Iranian foreign policy and the Syrian response” between 1979-80, (p.p. 20-23) there is no allusion to the first revolutionary effort to post Iranian volunteers to Southern Lebanon in early 1980 which was a significant event in the triangular relations of Iran, Syria and Lebanon. Another example is the ties between the Office of Freedom Movements, which was under the auspices of the radical faction inside the Islamic Republic, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. This issue remained a thorny matter in the bilateral ties till the mid-1980s.

The same weakness is evident when the book deals with the interconnection of the Iran-Iraq war and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and different stances in the capitals of the region concerning Israeli reaction to Iran’s achievements against Iraq. The book fails to provide any account of the Iranian point of view regarding the Israeli invasion, which was an important factor regarding the decision of Iran’s leaders to post Revolutionary Guard forces in Lebanon and then revising their decision to bring most of the forces back to the Iran-Iraq war front a few weeks later.

As far as the Syrian politics is concerned, political factionalism and its role in the foreign policy was much less salient under Hafez al-Assad. Goodarzi considers this as a non-issue in his analysis. However,
one would still wonder if the book included a research on the internal rivalries and disagreements in Syria under the President Hafez al-Assad, some basic assumptions of the book would change or not. For instance, discussing the religious ties between the ‘Alawi regime and the Shi‘ite clerics in Iran, the books assumes that “the religious element has not been a determining factor and has had little if any salience” (p. xiv) in the relationship. Goodarzi demonstrates this point by discussing different factors that were behind the creation and consolidation of the alliance. Nevertheless, when one talks with Iranian officials who were intimately involved in the relationship, they describe this religious affinity as a ground for mutual trust and point out the important role of influential ‘Alawi figures, such as Mohammed Nassif, in consolidating the alliancevi.

In all, the book’s focus on the formative years of the 1980s makes it a unique work and fundamental to understanding the nature of the relationship of the two regimes. As the author puts forward “if one understand the period between 1979 and 1988 well, one then can more easily comprehend and decipher how the partnership has evolved since then” (p. xii). However, Jubin Goodarzi’s work needs to be complemented by other research that is based on primary sources and interviews and investigates the Islamic Republic-Bathist Syria alliance through the factionalisms inside the two regimes.

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i The author has interviewed for this work, the former Iranian president Abolhassan Bani-Sadr and the former US assistant secretary of state in the 1980s, Richard Murphy.

ii Dispatching the volunteers was undertaken by radicals to defy the moderate foreign policy of the Bazargan government. (see: an-Nahar, 1979/12/08 & 1979/12/10; Ettela‘at, 1358/09/27 - 1979/10/19 & 1358/10/03 - 1979/12/24).


iv At the time, some top Iranian officials, including the former Ambassador Mohtashami-pour saw the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 as a direct response to Iranian achievements in the war front against Iraq (author’s interview with Ali Akbar Mohtashami-pour, Tehran, 2010/07/01).

v Mohammed Nassif, whose sobriquet is Abu Wael, is one of the most prominent ‘Alawi figures in Syria. He has been in charge of the Iranian file as well as the Iraqi and Lebanese files for more than three decades and due to his unique relations with Hafez al-Assad has had much leverage over internal and external matters in Syria.

vi This is based on my interviews with several Iranian officials, including Mohammad Irani, Tehran, 2010/01/23 & Ali Akbar Mohtashami-pour, Tehran, 2010/07/01.