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The Iranian-Syrian relations and regional balance in the Middle East 1979-2019

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Σε αυτό το σημείο θα ήθελα να ευχαριστήσω τον επιβλέποντα καθηγητή μου, κύριο Σωτήρη Ρούσσο, για την καθοδήγηση και βοήθεια που μου προσέφερε καθ' όλη την διάρκεια συγγραφής της συγκεκριμένης εργασίας.

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Keywords: alliance, competition, regional hegemony, power vacuum, state and non state actors, balance of powers, Shia, Sunni, Middle East, national interests, Syrian-Iranian alliance

Abstract

This thesis examines the Iranian-Syrian relations under the prism of Alliance Theory. Damascus and Tehran have built an alliance in order to deal with common threats and enemies. Despite their differences, Syria and Iran have formed a regional alliance for their survival in the Middle East. Furthermore, this thesis focuses on how their attempts to balance against prevailing threats have affected the developments in the regional system of the Middle East.

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1. Introduction

The aim of the thesis is to examine the Iranian-Syrian alliance by focusing on how they dealt with common threats and enemies and in turn examine how the balancing against the prevailing threats affects the developments in the regional system of the Middle East. In order to expand their influence and defend their national interests, both Tehran and Damascus have intervened in the domestic politics of their neighboring countries, such as Lebanon and Iraq. Syria and Iran have formed a regional alliance, despite their differences, to assure their survival in the Middle East. The basis of the current Iranian-Syrian alliance dates back to 1979. Since the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Tehran and Damascus have shared goals and faced common threats. They were both politically and economically isolated by the West, while, at the same time, Iran and Syria seek to counterbalance the power of the Gulf States, the United States (U.S.) and Israel in the Middle East world.

During the last three decades, the coalition of Syria and Iran had to deal with several challenges that could destabilize further the region, such as the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the embargo imposed by the western powers in 2003 and the Syrian civil war in 2011. Syria was the only Arab state that became a valuable ally of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. The mutual aid was crucial during the Iraqi invasion of Iran, the Israel invasion of Lebanon and the Syrian civil war. Despite their differences, Iran and Syria share common interests in the regional system of the Middle East. More importantly, they both have a hostile stance towards United States and a common desire to decrease the American influence as well as diminish the Israeli presence in the region. At the same time, both Syria and Iran wanted to promote their regional role in the Middle East. To this end, they have mutually supported each other. They also cooperate in supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. In addition, in order to assure the survival of the regime Tehran's involvement in Syria was detected since the beginning of the Syrian civil war.

Nevertheless, the involvement of global and regional powers, as well as armed non-state actors as part of the international system got involved into the Syrian conflict in order to defend their national interests and expand their sphere of influence. More specifically, direct and indirect role of U.S. and Russia in an effort to maintain the balance of power and counter potential hegemons in the

region (Mearsheimer 2011: 75-92) complicated the power dynamics in the Syrian conflict and, particularly, that of the Syrian and Iranian alliance. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the Syrian-Iranian nexus throughout the last three decades. I argue that this relation is not merely a 'marriage of convenience' but a strategic partnership that relies on economic, political and cultural ties. This alliance provides confidence to both parties and multiplies their power to defend their interests, manage regional conflicts and increase regional stability (Yacoubian M. 2007).

The cooperation between the two states expands into many different fields. In 2004, Tehran and Damascus deepened further their relations with mutual military agreements, with the "Strategic Cooperation" agreement, which was fortified in 2006 by a mutual defense pact and in 2007, they signed an additional military agreement (Yacoubian M. 2007). Furthermore, Iran provided Syria with military equipment, such as missiles, military technology and logistical support. In terms of economic cooperation, the two signed numerous agreements that range from agriculture, mineral fuels oils to distillation products. In addition, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Tehran has been lending funds to the Syrian regime up to 7.6 billion and oil shipments between the period of 2013 and 2018 (Waleed Abu al-Khair, 2021). In addition, Iranian companies have invested in the trade sector and opened companies in the heart of Damascus. The Syrian-Iranian axis also promoted cultural exchanges. Iran invested millions of dollars into the restoration of Shiite shrines in Damascus and Latakia in order to promote Shiism in Syria. Furthermore, it is estimated that approximately one million Iranian tourists visit these cultural centers every year, constituting a substantial revenue for tourism in Syria (Yahel I. 2021). Hence, during the recent years, the two countries have been building a strong uphold to deepen their ties and, at the same, time fulfill their interests.

The following sections will examine the relations between the two countries, during the period between 1982-1985 when Israel invaded Lebanon, the Amal- Hezbollah clashes in the 1980s, the period of Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the end of the first Persian Gulf War in 1988 and their alliance into the twenty first century, during the period of the Syrian civil war. From the beginning of the civil war, Iran supported Al-Assad regime in order to protect one of its key allies in the Middle East against regional rivals. Finally, the Tehran-Damascus alliance will be presented in two main phases. The first phase commenced in 1979, when the Islamic Revolution of Iran took place until the death

of Hafez al-Assad and the second phase started from 2003 until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war (Goordazi A., 2013).

2. Theoretical framework

Realism has been used as the main theoretical framework within the field of International Relations in order to explain the states behavior and the international system. Hans Morgenthau's approach regarding the idea of a "state's struggle for power" and the interdependence between a state's power and its available material resources has been central to realism (Hans Morgenthau, 1985). In the 20th century Neorealism or Structural Realism emerged. One of its most prominent representatives is Kenneth Waltz with his work "Theory of International Politics". Neorealism examines the interaction of the states in the international system in order to assure their survival, security and national interests. Therefore, the main principle of neorealism is that the co-existence of states in a system is characterized as "anarchical" due to the lack of a supreme authority. The continuous battle of the states for their survival generates antagonisms and coalitions in a process of a power balance between them (Kenneth Waltz, 1979).

This dissertation examines the causes of alliances between the states and the balance of power theory. The central idea of the balance of threat theory is the need of states to ally in numerous sectors related to their military capabilities, economic prosperity and political cohesion as a response to imbalances of power in the international system and threats posed by other states. According to the balance of threat theory of Stephen M. Walt, the Iranian-Syrian alliance responds to prevailing threats in order to feel more secure as they face common external threats. Despite the differences in regard to the state composition and their ideology, the geopolitical location of the two states plays a vital role in relation to their neighboring countries. Since 1979, Iran has become an Islamic republic, while Syria has a secular Arab nationalism within its borders. Yet, Syria and Iran form a strategic partnership to assure their security. According the balance of threat theory of Stephen M. Walt, the Iranian- Syrian alliance is based on confronting the prevailing threats. The states have two ways to deal with regional threats, either by balancing or bandwagoning. The states in the Middle East usually form more secure regional balance alliances because they form combined opposition. States have the tendency to align with states that are either neighbors or close

to another powerful state or to a state with an aggressive external strategy. Furthermore, Walt's hypothesis on bandwagoning is that "the states facing an external threat will ally with the most threatening power", which does not apply to the case of Iran's and Syria's alliance. The reason for a state to use bandwagoning is because the powerful state has important offensive capabilities that can be used in case it or one of its allies is facing a serious threat (Stephen M.Walt, 1988: 17-40). Furthermore, according to Walt, a common ideology may become an obstacle for states to form long lasting alliances (Roussos S., 2008: 21-22), such an example is the competition and rivalry between the Baathists regimes of Syria and Iraq. However, the Syrian and Iranian national interests overcome their differences in order to form regional stability.

The main difference between Syria and Iran is in the very composition of the state. On the one hand, Syrians are Arabs, with a Sunni majority population and a secular regime. On the other hand, Iranians are Persians, Shiites and since the 1979 they have established a theocratic regime. Iran is surrounded by hostile Arab states and, at the same time, Syria needs to balance the power and threat of Iraq. In the fast-changing environment of the Middle East, the mistrust and the short-term alliances are a common phenomenon. Cooperation may be durable if the alliance roots in common strategic interests and common enemies, as in the Syrian-Iranian case. This alliance lays on the regional balance of the Middle East that emerged during the 1980s and the need for the states to counterbalance the power of Israel and U.S. In addition, during the Iraq-Iran war in 1980, Syria provided Iran with valuable diplomatic and military assistance. Syria also supported Iranian-back militia, such as Hezbollah, in Lebanon (Ehteshami A., 2014: 4-29).

Their nexus assures better chances for the survival of their regimes and to achieve their long-term goals. Iran aspires to expand its influence in the region and counter pressure from the western powers. Syria seeks to regain the Golan Heights from Israel after the 1967 war. Syria along with Iran had to counterbalance common threats in the region such as the threatening ambitions of Saddam Hussein in Iraq to create a predominant regional power. In addition, they achieved to force out the US peacekeepers from Lebanon in 1984. Furthermore, despite the fact that in some instances Iran and Syria had conflicting interests, they both benefited from their support to Hezbollah in the July War of 2006 against Israel and in the case of the Syrian civil war they cooperated in order to defeat the opposition rebel groups that were fighting the Syrian regime since 2011.

After the deposition of Pahlavi Shah, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Ba'athist Syria were able to form a new balance of powers against common enemies, such as Iraq and Israel, in the regional subsystem of the Middle East. In order to examine the Iranian-Syrian axis, the following section will provide the theoretical framework of Alliance theory. Section three will examine the transformation of the Syrian-Iranian relations after the Islamic Revolution and how this new era was characterized by the Syrian-Iranian alliance. The Iraqi invasion of Iran inspired the Syrian-Iranian rapprochement according to S. Walt in order for the two countries to balance the threat of Iraq. This section will also analyze the cooperation between Syria and Iran during the period of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and their tensions in 1985 till 1988. Section four will address the new phase of alliance between Tehran and Damascus. After the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, the new Syrian President Bashar al-Assad further deepened the ties with Tehran. Main emphasis is given on the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the July War of 2006. Section five will focus on Tehran's support to Assad's regime during the Syrian civil war. Finally, the last section will provide an overview of the Syrian-Iranian relations over the past three decades.

3. Syria and Iran: From the Islamic Revolution to the death of Hafez Assad (1979-2000)

The overthrow of Pahlavi Shah signified a drastic change not only within Iran but also on a regional level. The 1979 Islamic Republic Revolution of Iran launched new era. The Iranian foreign policy was not pro-Western as it was under the rule of Pahlavi Shah. The Islamic Republic was hostile towards the U.S., Israel and the pro-Western Arab states, changing the existing power balance of the Middle East. This period of regional bipolarity between the Soviet Union and the U.S. affected the coalitions and the rivalries in the Middle East among Iran, Turkey, Israel and other Arab states. Iran's unstable environment after the regime change created challenges and opportunities to a number of Arab regimes. In fact, Saddam Hussein decided to invade Iran as an opportunity to expand his influence. Given the antagonism between Iraq and Syria, the Iraqi-Iranian war was an opportunity for the formation of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. The Syrian President Hafez Assad was among the first to recognize the government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, welcoming the opportunity of cooperation with Iran against their common enemy Iraq. Damascus at the time was

isolated from the other Arab states as a result of the Camp David accords in 1979; thus, Assad aspired to build closer relations with the new Iranian revolutionary government (Goordazi A., 2006: 11-33).

The antagonism between the Syrian and Iraqi Baath caused an ideological struggle that affected the Syrian- Iraqi relations and could threaten Assad's regime. The rivalry of the two Baath parties dates back to 1966 when the Syrian Baath party under the Salah Jadid marginalized the panarabist members of the party, such as Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, creating a split, which inspired the creation of a second Baath party in Baghdad in 1968 under Ahmed Hassan's and Saddam's Hussein leadership. While both regimes espoused Baathism, Iraq adhered to the radical wing of Baath whereas Syria adopted a more moderate ideology. This led to the ideological competition of the two regimes. The split of the two regimes followed the mistrust and the distance between Alawis in Syria and Sunni of Takrit in Iraq. Thus, upon the Iraqi-Iranian war, Syria aligned itself with Iran on the basis of a common enemy. Iraq sought to counterbalance the regional threat posed by revolutionary Iran. In order to undermine Syria's support to Iran in the early 1980s, Iraq attempted to aid the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to destabilize the Alawi-dominated Bath regime in Syria. This offered a new dimension to the Syrian-Iraqi rivalry: while in the 1970s, the two Baath parties attempted to manipulate Arab nationalism, during the 1980s. They instrumentalized sectarian politics by backing non-Baath opponents in the rival state (Hinnebusch, 2014).

3.1 Syrian-Iranian rapprochement and the Iran-Iraq war

The Syrian-Iraqi relations started to deteriorate due to their failed attempts to create a common political front following the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt. At the same time, the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was highly suspicious of the Islamic Republics intentions to destabilize his own regime. Furthermore, he considered the turbulences in Iran as a chance to extend his power and territory against the Islamic regime in order to become a regional power. It is interesting how the balance of power changed in the Iran-Syria alliance after the Iraqi invasion of Iran on September 1980 (Gambill G., 2001). Initially, Iran was more independent from Syria. However, after the invasion, Syria was the main Arab state that supported Iran diplomatically and military from the beginning of the war. On a diplomatic level, the Syrian President Hafez Assad officially boycotted the Amman Unity Summit in 1980, in order to prevent a united Arab front against Iran. On a military level, Syria provided intelligence and stationed more than 200 tanks and 8,000 men on an operational base close to its borders with Jordan.

On a military level, during the war, Tehran received a large amount of military equipment from Syria, China, Libya and North Korea, while Baghdad supplied their arms from the Soviet Union, France, Brazil, Austria, China, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. In 1985, Libya and Syria were the main supporters of Iran during the war and provided Tehran with Soviet-made Scud-A and Scud-B missiles that had all the operational requirements to attack Baghdad. Syria also supported Iran with logistical assistance for the attack on Iraq's al-Walid airbase. (Wastnidge E., 2017) Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the two sides in the battle field was affected by the economic warfare between them. In 1982, Iran closed the Shatt al-Arab River to the Iraqi shipping, which is of high strategic importance for the two countries (Segal D., 1988). In response, Iraq blocked the Iranian ports, shipping facilities such as the oil terminal Kharg Island, in order to isolate economically the country in 1984. Hence, Syria, as one of the main allies of Iran, blocked Iraqi access to main oil export pipelines that passed through its territory (Ehteshami, Hinnebusch, 2002). Consequently, Iraq faced a significant decrease in oil exports, from 1.5 million barrels per day to under 700,000, while Tehran had almost 3 million barrels per day. Since then, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait built new corridors to Iraq to transship their oil and finance their war effort and the

Iranian oil shipments steadily declined. Despite all the difficulties, this war proved to Iran that Syria is an ally that it can count on and cooperate on every level.

The Iran-Iraq war and the alliance between Syria and Iran had an effect on the relations of Damascus with its Arab neighbors. Syria was politically and economically isolated from the Arab coalition that supported Iraq. Saudi Arabia and Gulf states turned to the U.S. for protection and re-examined its narrative over an Arab-Israeli settlement. On the contrary, Assad supported the Iranian position against Israel (Ehteshami, Hinnebusch, 2002).

3.2. Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982

The period between 1982 and 1985 can be characterized as the peak of the Syrian-Iranian cooperation. It is the period of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and, at the same time, Iran had the upper hand in the Iran-Iraq war. The Iran-Iraq war was a serious factor of instability in the region that affected the Iranian foreign policy regarding the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Even though, Iran was involved in an ongoing, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon caught the attention of Iran as Israel was a main enemy (Tanner H., 1982). In addition, the Tehran-Damascus alliance was formalized by a number of bilateral agreements in 1982 mainly on oil, trade and strategic issues. As a result, Iran in return of Syria's support became one of the main oil suppliers of Syria by providing 9m tons of free bartered discounted crude oil per year (Calabrese J., 1990).

The Lebanese civil war had dragged many regional and international actors, including the U.S. and Israel. While the former aimed at expanding its role in the region, Israel aimed at removing the PLO from Israel's northern borders, who had established in political and military base in Southern Lebanon. On June 3rd of 1982, PLO attempted to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in Britain. In response, Israel sent almost 1.000-1.500 troops in Lebanon along with some forces from United States, France, Italy and Britain. The main purpose of the Western powers was to supervise the withdrawal of the Palestinian forces from the area. In addition, Tel Aviv wanted also to expel the PLO forces from Lebanon and create a new political order closer to its interests (Bradley M. Jacobs, 1995).

The Israeli operation in Lebanon started on June 6, 1982 and was named Operation Peace in Galilee. The alliance between Syria and Iran was reinforced against their common enemy. Assad's policy was based on Syria's special relations with USSR and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Goordazi J., 2006: 63). For Damascus, its main fear was that it did not want to be dragged into a war with Israel. In addition, Assad was suspicious of the Christian community that achieved advances within the Lebanese civil war with Israeli backing; he also feared that the Christians could challenge Syria's integrity, leading to the scenario of a partition of Lebanon against Syrian interests (Harris W., 1985). The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the presence of external powers affected the internal balance of power among the different Christians, Shia and Sunni groups. The two main aspects of the Iranian foreign policy during the Israeli invasion were to deepen its alliance with Syria while creating a sphere of influence in Lebanon by supporting Hezbollah and focusing on the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict with a strategy endorsed by Syria. Even though, Ayatollah Khomeini declared that Iran would not send sizable military force to Lebanon until the end of Iran-Iraq war. The key figures of the Syrian- Iranian nexus during the 1980s have been also Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Hojjatoleslams Mehdi Karrubi, Sadeq Khalkhali and Mohammad Khoinia (Ehteshami A., 2014: 43).

The Israeli invasion is a period also characterized as a phase of Shia political awakening. The Lebanese Shia had close links to Iran and many of them supported the Islamic Revolution, despite the differences between the two communities. Many religious members of Lebanese Shia community were disappointed by the leadership of Amal (Siklawi, 2012:10, Saouli 2017:58-59). The invasion had a direct effect on the Shia community that mainly inhabited in South Lebanon. The Israeli troops were stationed in the South, which caused friction between Israeli forces and the Shia forces in the area. In order to protect the Shia community, Iran, with the Syrian approval, sent the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to train the Shia community in Lebanon; the key figures among them were Subhi al-Tufaiyli and Abbas Moussawi (Daher 2019:48).

Between 1982 and 1984, Assad's strategy gained an important influence in Lebanon and reduced the Israeli and American influence over the Lebanon's foreign policy. The Syrian military presence was over 40,000 troops and in an area that covered almost 50 percent of Lebanon's territory (Harris W., 1985). In addition, in 1984, Hezbollah was created and supported by Iran as a way of importing

the Islamic Revolution of Iran in Lebanon and fighting the Israeli forces (Daher, 2019: 50-51). Tehran's intention was to promote the presence and the role of Hezbollah as a driving force to the Shia demands in Lebanon. For strategic reasons, Lebanon was of vital importance for both Syria, due to its proximity and Iran due to its ambitions of expanding their religious and political interests in the region. The Syrian-Iranian alliance in the case of Lebanon reflects a common policy of the two countries to protect themselves and also respond to a common threat. The interests of the two countries coincided (Walt, 1985). For this purpose, Hezbollah meant to assist Iran to expand its influence in the South of Lebanon while Syria did not show any resistance (Wastnidge E., 2017).

The Supreme Religious Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini declared from the beginning of the war his opposition against Israel and organized the military activities in Lebanon. Almost 1,500 Iranians were sent to join the Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon (Calabrese J., 1990). Before Hezbollah, the most dominant Shia Lebanese militia was Amal that had a central role in Lebanon. Amal militias were fighting against pro-Arafat Palestinians and their Sunni allies. However, despite its position, Tehran was trying to approach them as Khomeini's strategy at that time was to boost the common Muslim feelings among the different militia groups to counter Zionism. In addition, the Syrian military presence and the support from Iran resulted the Israeli retreat from most of Lebanon as well as the withdrawal of U.S. and French powers by 1984-1985. Hence, Syria benefited from the buffer zone that was created in the Southern part of Lebanon.

 The bilateral relations of Syria and Iran were further consolidated and the roots of this relationship explain Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict in 2011. The establishment of Hezbollah in Lebanon served to a great extent the long-term considerations of both Damascus and Tehran. Israel's invasion was the triggering event for Iran to support the creation of Hezbollah, in order to defend the Shia interests in the area. The Iranian ambassador to Syria, Ali Akbar Mohtasimi in 1982 gave an interview at the Iranian newspaper "Sharg" and described his discussion with Ayatollah Khomeini concerning the situation in Syria and Lebanon. The priority of the Supreme Religious Leader of Iran was to reinforce Hezbollah by providing training and forces in Syria and Lebanon (Rubin M., 2009). Hence, it should be noted that during 1982 and 1985, the Syrian-Iranian axis was strengthened, the Shiites in Lebanon were radicalized and waged an unconventional war against Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) which promoted the partial withdrawal of Israeli troops from

Lebanese territory. Nevertheless, the Iranian and Syrian forces did not manage to gain full control over Lebanon and low-intensity clashes with the remaining Israeli forces in the south continued for years. Up until 1985, Iran and Syria strategic interests converged in Lebanon. However, after the partial retreat of Israel from Lebanon, some level of friction manifested between Damascus and Tehran. This intra-alliance tensions became evident in early 1985 (Goordazi J., 2006: 130-132).

3.3. Intra-alliance tensions 1985-88

While the war between Iran and Iraq was continuing, the Iranian attacks against Arabic ships further worried Syria for this growing Arab-Iranian polarization (Gambrell J., 2019). In addition, despite the fact that Syria and Iran had succeeded in 1985 to prompt an Israeli withdrawal from the most of Lebanon and to create a "security zone", the two allies had diverging goals over Lebanon as each sought to bring the country under its own influence (Friedman T., 1985). On the one hand, Hezbollah's influence increased among the Lebanese Shia community with the Iranian support at the expense of Amal, Syria aligned with Amal on the basis of countering the Iranian and Hizbullah influence in Lebanon.

Even though Amal did not expect Hezbollah to become a political entity that would threaten it on the political Lebanese scene, tensions arose between them. In 1985, Imad Mughniyah, a Hezbollah member, organized a skyjacking in exchange of the release of 700 Lebanese prisoners in Israel. Syrians, in collaboration with Iran, successfully mediated the release of prisoners. Nevertheless, the relations of Amal with Hezbollah started deteriorating because of their competition over the political authority in the area (Norton, 2014, 42-43; Daher 2019, 70-71).

Overall, between 1985 and 1988 the Iranian-Syrian relations were tested. The friction demonstrated that their alliance is not just a marriage of convenience. Initially, Syria was politically isolated from the Arab states after the Egyptian- Jordanian- Iraqi axis. In addition, Assad needed more allies to counter the Israeli forces in Lebanon and the prospect of a Syrian- Israeli conflict. Furthermore, after Assad's support to Tehran during the Iraqi-Iran war, Syria needed to assure security on its eastern border with Iraq. The environment was also challenging in Lebanon after Hezbollah's increase in popularity. Saudi Arabia and Jordan tried to take advantage of the situation and alienate Syria from Iran in favor of Iraq. Consequently, the alliance of Syria and Iran could have collapsed if

the two did not take into consideration their long-term strategic interests and disregard the issues that caused friction between them. While both Iran and Syria were competing over Lebanon, they had to confront greater concerns on a regional level.

The rivalry between Syria and Iran escalated after the Syrian attacks in Tawheed on 1985. The Syrian military had decided to crash the Palestinian movement in Lebanon and avoid going onto a new war with Israel. On the contrary, the Iranian media and the clerics condemned Syria's actions as a "war against Islam" (Harris W., 1985). Iran's criticism to the Syrian regime continued also after the tripartite talks in 1985, between Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze militia, Nabih Berri, the head of the Amal militia and Elie Hobeika the chief of the Lebanese forces. It should be noted that the Palestinian and Hezbollah representatives were excluded from the talk process. Tehran's main priority during the negotiations with Syria was to promote the Muslim unity and the Shia interests. Nonetheless, the tripartite agreement collapsed, gravely affecting Syria's regional and international prestige. Furthermore, the Syrian- Iranian relations were further challenged after Amal's militia attacked the PLO who was supported by Iran and Hezbollah (UNHCR, 1992). To add to that, after Iraq intensively bombed Iranian oil facilities during the oil price crash during 1985 and 1986, Iran was unable to provide Syria with oil and refused to pay off its oil debts. Throughout the same period, the Arab states and, especially, Jordan in early 1986 attempted to improve the relations of Hafez al-Assad with Saddam Hussein, in an effort to further isolate Iran. However, Assad refused to turn his back on Iran and proved that despite the challenges their alliance was based on their long-term interests (Goordazi Jubin, 2006:133-134).

After 1987, Iran's clerical leaders became more determined to expand their religious, ideological and political interests in Lebanon among the Lebanese Shiite community. Damascus wanted a Lebanese president and a parliament that would cooperate with Syria. Moreover, Assad was still skeptical over the Iranian policy especially with Hezbollah's activities. Even though, Syria was in favor of the guerrilla attacks against Israel, its role became more important after the First Intifada, the uprising in Palestine in 1987 (Scheller 2014: 121). After the clashes Syria could attract the Arab support and tip the balance of power in its favor against the axis of Egypt, Jordan and Iraq. On the other hand, Hezbollah, who represented Shiite radicalism, wanted to form a new political order in Lebanon with the blessings of Iran. Assad's political plan differed and he supported the idea of

establishing a secular, multi-sectarian order in Lebanon. As a result, the contradictions between the Syrian and Iranian policies tested their alliance as they had to deal and manage the clashes between Amal and Hezbollah (Norton A., 2007).

Tehran took a more active role to undermine the peace agreement for Lebanon that was signed under the auspices of the Arab League. As the civil war in Lebanon was coming to an end, in the spring of 1988 till 1989 there were clashes between Amal and Hezbollah, which ended on 1989 with Iranian and Syrian mediation. Iran and Syria signed the "Damascus agreement" in which Hezbollah would be allowed to remain in the Southern Lebanon (Ehteshami, 1997:145). At the same time, Christian militias were clashing with the Lebanese Army. Despite the tensions, the alliance of Syria and Iran was crucial to survive for their long-term strategic considerations and interests in the region. Hezbollah turned into a key armed non-state actor following the Taif Accords that ended the Lebanese civil war in 1990. Hezbollah as a militia force in Lebanon served both Syria and Iran against Israel. The Southern part of Lebanon in the meantime it became a buffer zone between Israel and Syria (Lawson F., 2007). Consequently, the years between 1985 and 1988 the challenges that appeared for the Syrian- Iranian alliance further matured their cooperation and set aside their differences over Hezbollah for their common good.

3.4. Iran and Syria since 1989

The two states were aiming to save their alliance and support each other so as to increase their influence in the region and especially along their borders. Iran continued providing significant quantities of free oil to Syria. In addition, Tehran mediated between Amal and Hezbollah the summer of 1989. Purpose of the Islamic Republic's mediation was to bring Syria and Iran closer (Calabrese J., 1990).

During the 1990s and after the Gulf War, the balance of powers in the Middle East was divided between the pro- western countries, Israel and Turkey on the one hand, and Iran and Syria on the other (Degang S., 2009). Even though, after the Taif Accords in 1990, the Syrian- Iranian relations could have been disrupted, their alliance managed to survive. In fact, Tehran and Damascus created a common institution, the Syrian- Iranian cooperation committee. In addition, they deepened their cooperation in many different levels including a joint program to manufacture ballistic, cruise, surface to surface missiles and manufacturing facilities in Hama and Aleppo. In 1991, Syria and Iran held numerous meetings. The Syrian chief of staff General Hikmat Shihabi went to Tehran in order to negotiate for the building of a factory in Syria for a joint development and production of surface missiles (IranWatch, 2021).Furthermore, President Hafez al Assad of Syria and President Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran made an agreement in 1991 that the Iran-backed forces could remain armed in the southern Lebanon. Hence, Iranian troops along with Syria's 40.000 troops remained in southern Lebanon which was inhabited by 1.2 million Shiite Muslims. The two allies focused on creating a new regional order after the disastrous Gulf War and taking a central role in the political scene (New York Times, 1991).

By the end of the Cold War, the U.S. had the monopoly of power in the international system. Syria deepened its cooperation with Iran in a period that the economic and political support to each other was important in order to counter their rivals in the region. Both Iran and Syria had to deal with a severe economic situation domestically and boost their economies, with investments and economic cooperation agreements. Initially, they jointly developed ballistic missiles, armed Hezbollah and Hamas in order to pressure Israel. At the same time, they attempted to influence the events in

Southern Lebanon that led to the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon in 2000 (United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

4. Syrian- Iranian alliance 2000- 2011

After the death of Hafez al- Assad in 2000, his son, Bashar al Assad, became the new President of Syria. His presidency partially transformed the Syrian-Iranian alliance. It may be argued that Bashar al Assad viewed Iran as a strategic ally. Contrary to his father, Bashar al-Ashad had to confront legitimacy issues within the Syrian regime as well as difficulties regarding Syria's foreign affairs. Syria was further isolated, making it an easy target for foreign interests, especially of Saudi Arabia's (Sunayama S., 2007). Furthermore, the regional developments triggered by 9/11 the US invasion in Iraq and the Lebanese war of 2006 deepened the ties between Syria and Iran, who sought to build a common front to face the   new regional challenge. The Bush administration, at the same time, imposed economic sanctions on Damascus and isolated Iran because of its nuclear activities. In response, Tehran and Damascus signed a military cooperation agreement in 2006 for against Israel and the United States. Iran invested billions of dollars to support the Syrian economy. So, the alliance was based on a number of factors: their common experiences, threats, their geographic proximity and their leaders' perceptions. Both Bashar al-Assad and Khatami considered their long-term interests and alliance would empower the region (Nader Ibrahim M. Bani Nasur, 2014).

4.1. The US invasion of Iraq

The -US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 contributed to a swift balance of power in the region, and more specifically between Iran and Iraq. In the post-Saddam era, the Shia-dominated government of Iraq allowed Iran to increase its presence and influence in the country (Ehteshami, A., 2003 : 115-129). Iran used political and military proxies in Iraq in its favor in order to gain more power in the region. 60 percent of the Iraqi population is Shia, who were oppressed during Saddam's rule. Hence, after the collapse of the dictatorship, the Shiites had the great opportunity to obtain a decisive political role on Iraq's future and maintain close relations with Iran's clerical establishment (Johan Franzen, 2020).

The post-war period created a power vacuum that served the Shia and Kurds, who organized political forces to gain more influence in favor of their communities. The Iranian strategy during that period was focused on providing financial and political aid to Iraq that would guarantee an Iranian friendly government. In addition, Damascus and Tehran felt insecure with the extended U.S. presence in the region as a result of the American "war on terrorism" and feared that they would become targets of Bushes' administration. Iran's foreign policy aimed to expand its influence in Iraq in order to eliminate the American power in the Middle East. Many Iraqi paramilitary proxies have been sponsored by Tehran in the last 30 years. Iran's militia proxies were allowed to cross Syria's borders into Iraq. The Islamic Republic of Iran also focused on its political influence with some religious Shia organizations in Iraq, such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the Badr organization and the Dawah political party. Moreover, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Qods Forces were engaged in paramilitary assistance. More specifically, they provided training and equipment to many Iraqi militant groups; namely the Moqtad al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al Haq, paramilitary help to their (Mumtaz, Kashif, 2005). Furthermore, after Saddam Hussein's execution, Iraqi was unable to find alternative sources of revenue from oil or expand their private sector. In addition, numerous bilateral agreements were signed between Tehran and Baghdad in 2005 such as the memorandum of understanding on security cooperation and the commitment of the Islamic Republic to provide Iraq with petroleum products. Hence, Iran, since the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall, made considerable efforts to maintain close ties with Iraq on soft and hard power issues and establish a strong Shiite dominated government. According to S.

Walt's theory, the main purpose of the Iranian-Iraqi rapprochement was the stability of the region and the good relations between the two neighbors in order to counterbalance future threats (United States Institute of Peace, 2005).

Iran's rapprochement with Iraq compelled Syria to reinforce and deepen even further its alliance with Tehran. In 2003, Syria and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding concerning the creation of a free trade zone between them. In addition, Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam went to Tehran to meet with Khatami, Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei in order to establish a joint policy toward Iraq. In 2005, the Syrian Prime Minister Muhammad Naji Utri visited Iran to sign a mutual defense pact. Meanwhile, for the sake of their alliance, Damascus supported the Iranian nuclear research program, despite the international disapproval. In regards to Lebanon, Syria, after its troops' withdrawal, encouraged Iran to strengthen its ties with Hezbollah and provide the latter with economic assistance (Frewd H.Lawson, 2007: 39-42).

Hence, the establishment of U.S. military bases in Iraq had numerous consequences in the balance of power in the Middle East. The presence of a hegemonic power so close to Syria's and Iran's borders threatened Damascus and Tehran, compelling them to counterbalance. At any given moment, the US army could potentially attack Syria and Iran, making the subsistence of their alliance was more vital than ever. A possible scenario was that after the invasion of Iraq could have a domino effect in the Middle East, which the US would entrench its hegemonic role in the region. The rise of Shia power in Iraq served Iran's interests and allowed it to expand its influence in the country. In addition, the US attempt of weakening and isolating the Syrian regime of Bashar al Assad had opposite results because it strengthened the regime's nationalist positions and fostered the alliance between Syria and Iran as they had to handle common threats and enemies in the region (Raymond Hinnebusch, 2003:204-222).

4.2 The case of Lebanon

The overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003 signified a new era between Iran, Syria and Iraq. During this period, Iran's influence increased. Tehran became closer to Hezbollah, who by the 1990s had established a state-within-a-state. The Syrian- Iranian efforts renewed their common interests and cooperation agreements. A common threat for the Syrian-Iranian nexus was Saudi Arabia. Saudis felt threatened by the constant increase of the Iranian influence in Iraq and Lebanon.. Riyadh sought to weaken Iran's position directly or indirectly by attacking one of its allies either Syria or Hezbollah. The assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafim Hariri on February 14 of 2005, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, was a pretext to push Syria out of Lebanon (BBC News, 2020).

Syria was accused for the assassination and anti-Syrian forces organized and demanded the withdrawal of the Syrian troops, the dissolution of the pro-Syrian government and an independent investigation of Prime's Minister Rafik Hariri death by an international commission. The protests against the Syrian presence in Lebanon, which came to be known as the "Cedar Revolution" called for Lebanon's liberation from Syrian dominance. As a consequence, Lebanon went through an extremely unstable period due to two reasons: first, the power struggles of the political parties and second, the external pressures from Syria and Iran on the one hand and their opponents, Saudi Arabia and United States, on the other Lebanon turned into a battle field of the Saudi-Iranian antagonisms and pressures (Wilson Center, 2006). After all, the Syrian troops had to withdraw from Lebanon by April of 2005. Damascus was once again isolated, hostile against the Arab countries that supported the Syrian withdrawal and pressured by the U.S., France and other western powers. In addition, all these tensions brought strengthened the alliance between Syria and Iran as well as their support to Hezbollah (Reuters, 2020). Hezbollah, after the withdrawal of the Syrian troops, became a powerful political actor within the Lebanese political scene. On March of 2005, Hezbollah, after Syria's announcement of withdrawal, decided to send one of its members to join the Lebanese cabinet, which was a result of the power vacuum that was created in Lebanon. Hezbollah's active political and military role was crucial for the Syrian interests and against the Israeli expansionism (Joseph Alagha, 2005).

4.3 Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006

The war between the Iranian-backed Hezbollah and the Israeli forces in 2006 demonstrated the strong Iranian-Syrian alliance. The triggering event of the 34-day war was the abduction of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah. The response from Tel-Aviv was a military attack on Lebanon, which aimed at the liberation of the IDF soldiers and the destruction of Hezbollah that had become extremely powerful (CSIS, 2008).

The war ended on August of 2006 with devastating consequences on Lebanon as it left behind numerous casualties. While 43 Israeli civilians and 12 IDF soldiers, at least 1,109 Lebanese were killed and more than 4.000 were wounded with the majority of them being civilians (Kareem Chehayeb, 2021). Despite the fact that the 2006 July War lasted for only over a month, the destruction had caused an economic recession in Lebanon. According to the Lebanese government, the cost of the war reached 2.8 billion dollars. Having said that, Israel failed to weaken nor disarm Hezbollah. Hence, Hezbollah managed to survive the conflict because of its well-prepared guerilla campaigns against the Israeli forces but at the same time the Lebanese nation had to deal with extensive damage to its infrastructure and a high number of civilian casualties (Council on Foreign Relations, 2011).

Consequently, the fact that for the first time in an Arab-Israeli conflict an Arab force was able to defend itself against the IDF and not lose decisively and quickly rendered the 2006 July War of huge importance, according to many analysts . Furthermore, this boosted the moral and the role of Hezbollah in the following years, allowing it to have a crucial and more independent political role in Lebanon. Of course, the economic and military support from Iran via Syria assisted Hezbollah during the war in combination with its innovative tactics of guerilla war. Characteristically, Hezbollah during the war used modern antitank missiles, hit and run ambushes, rocket fire and roadside bombs. In addition, for the first time, the internet and the networks had an important role in promoting and propagating their actions to receive publicity (Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, 2008). The alliance among Iran, Syria and Hezbollah came to be known as the "Axis of Resistance" that was geared towards limiting Israeli and U.S. powers (Mounir al-Rabih, 2017).

5. The Arab Spring and the Syrian Iranian alliance

At the outset of the Arab Spring, Iran took a positive stance regarding the uprisings in the region. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini supported the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, as they were perceived as a continuation of the Islamic Awakening in the Middle East (Ali Alfoneh, 2011). However, Tehran had a different perspective when the uprisings reached states with which it had established a cooperation and invested interests with their regimes. For instance, Iran condemned the uprisings in Syria on July of 2011. Tehran portrayed the protests as efforts instigated by foreign powers such as the U.S. in an effort to change Syria's regime and expand American influence. Given that the civil war of Syria affected and threatened directly Iranian interests, Tehran became involved in the war since the beginning of the clashes in Syria.

Losing Damascus could signify a weakening of the Shia oriented and Iranian influence in the region. Consequently, Tehran provided full support to Assad's regime in order for it to survive. The anti-government groups were repelled by the regime's forces due to the Iranian weaponry, logistical and financial supplies and expertise. Undoubtedly, Iran's decision to become involve in the Syrian civil war came at a substantial political and economic costs (Ali Younes, 2019).

More specifically, the conflict in Syria between the Syrian Armed Forces led by the Syrian President Bashar-al-Assad and the Sunni opposition rebel groups, Salafi, jihadist groups and the mixed Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces. However, as the years were passing by, other regional and international actors became directly or indirectly involved in the Syrian war. Regional powers, such as Iran and Turkey along with Russia and the U.S., played a critical role in backing opposing sides of the conflict. The war in Syria rapidly transformed into a battle of interest between different states. The external intervention led the war to Syria's current situation. The Iranian presence was appreciable since the beginning of the war as its main objective was to increase its military and security influence in Syria (Yahel I., 2021).

The uprising in Syria became a central issue among the Iranian political circles and a top priority on its foreign policy agenda. The majority of the Iranian political elite believed that the support to Assad was vital to the Syrian-Iranian alliance which would assure the Iranian national security

interests. Assad was indispensable due to his common stance with Iran regarding foreign policy issues such as opposing the U.S. and Israel as well as supporting the Palestinian cause. As Ali Akbar Velayati, a former Foreign Minister of Iran, put it, that Syria should be protected because it is "the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel". In addition, Iran's access to Lebanon was via Syria, Khomeini considered that the Iranian intervention in the Syrian war vital due to Assad regime's role in empowering Hezbollah and its activities. Thus, the survival of the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah alliance offered them confidence, stability and power in the region against external powers (Jubin Goodarzi, 2013).

Between the years 2013 and 2018, Iran increased its direct involvement in the war in order to assist President Bashar al Assad to remain in power. Tehran created the National Defense Forces that was comprised of nearly 80.000 Alawites, Shiites and regime loyalists. Nevertheless, the regime had an important setback after the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), The extreme Sunni group posed a major threat to the regime as it gradually expanded territorially in northern and western Syria in 2014. Hence, Iran was determined to protect its interests in Syria and avert the rise of ISIS. For Iran, the Sunni-Shia conflict in Syria was an indirect fight against its main regional rival, Saudi Arabia. In other words, the Syrian conflict mirrored the broader antagonism between Sunni and Shia interests in the region (Jubin Goodarzi, 2013).

The Iranian military participation was extremely active since 2018 in the key areas where Syrian forces were fighting against the ISIS; particularly, the city of al-Bukamal was of high strategic importance for Iran was as it connects Iran to the Mediterranean Sea through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. In addition, Tehran's military assistance in provinces such as Deir ez-Zor where Russian forces are based since 2018. Moreover, Iranian and Syrian regime forces took control of al Bukamal which is a land corridor from Mediterranean Sea and also an area of great military and security importance. The fights in the area of Deir ez-Zor included thousands of fighters from IRGC and various Iraqi Shia militias that pledged loyalty to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini such as Kataib Hezbollah, Badr Brigades and Harakat Hezbollah al- Nujaba (Suadad al-Salhy, 2012). Furthermore, another Iranian-backed military force was present in the aforementioned fight, Hezbollah, perhaps the most powerful one, which was also responsible for the military training and assisting the local forces (Navvar Saban, 2021).

5.1. The Russian and Iranian diplomatic agenda towards Syria

Russia and Iran have been main supporters of the Syrian regime during the uprising for different reasons. Damascus is a strategic partner of Tehran while for Moscow the Assad regime serves to a great extent their interests. A superpower in the international system, Russia's interest in Damascus is to assure Moscow's global legitimacy. With Moscow's involvement in Syria, Russia gains more influence and power also on a regional level. For this purpose, the Russian government invested millions of dollars on Assad's regime on many different levels. Moscow supplied Syria with Russian military systems such as Pantsyr-SE1 guns and missiles, air defense systems and Buk-M2 systems. Furthermore, their cooperation involved on the energy sector via oil and gas extraction and delivery, the creation of hydroelectric facilities and bilateral trade agreements that reached more than 1 billion dollars by 2015. The Russian President Putin sought to develop bilateral relations between Syria and Russia, during the Syrian civil war in order to counterbalance the U.S. presence and influence in the Middle East (Dmitri Trenin, 2013).

At the same time, Russia conducted a number of bilateral agreements with Iran which included security, military cooperation and economic, oil, electricity and industrial agreements that reached up to 3 billion dollars in Iranian investment. In addition, Iran's relation with Syria was stronger and extended to numerous sectors including several loans from Iran in order to support the Syrian economy; first, on January of 2013 that reached 1 billion dollars while the second on the same year that reached almost 5.6 billion dollars (Salam al-Saadi, 2015). In regards to the oil sector, prior to the war, Syria was a net oil exporter. However, during the civil war, Assad's regime lost the majority of the towns and provinces that included oil fields. Thus, between 2012 and 2018, Iran shipped oil to Syria in order to support Assad's regime and avert a total economic collapse of the country (Karam Shaar, 2019).

After all, both Iran and Russia made numerous agreements with Assad's regime in order to support the Syrian economy and military during the civil war. This strategy aimed at intercepting the Western and US interference in the Syrian civil war. In addition, Tehran wanted to expand its influence not only against its Arab competitors such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab

Emirates but also against Turkey that had become a regional political rival of Iran. Hence, the Iranian hegemonic aspirations could be fulfilled if Tehran was on the side of the winner's after the war (Crosston D., 2014).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Syrian- Iranian relations over the past 30 years have proved that it is not just a 'marriage of convenience'. The survival of the Syrian and the Iranian regimes is vital for their interests and future aspirations. Iran with its Arab ally managed to expand its sphere of influence in the region and promote the Persian-Shia interests against the Sunni predominance. During the Iran-Iraq war, Syria supported Iran and provided its army with military assistance via its Soviet connection. In addition, both Damascus and Tehran coordinated their strategies in Lebanon to create a buffer zone between them and the Israeli threat. Iran's foreign policy is driven by its strategic interests in the region. In order to safeguard its desire to create a Shia arc of influence that passes through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, Tehran became involved in the Syrian civil war. During the Syrian crisis, Assad's regime along with the Iranian government tried to combat the expansion of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, control the Kurdish territories and, at the same time, protect and strengthen the influence of their regimes in the Middle East.

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