From a purely pragmatic point of view, the alliance between Iran and Syria that began in the early 1980s is irrational. The two countries would gain much by joining the American camp and dropping their overly aggressive foreign policy stance, not the least of which would include the lifting of punishing sanctions and the gain of millions of tourism dollars from Western travelers. The underlying rationale behind this partnership, then, must be a shared ideology, which in this case includes anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism and active support of Palestinian terrorist groups. As long as the two nations remain dedicated to this ideology, geopolitical realities will force them to remain bound to one another. Regime change in Damascus and/or Tehran is the only alternative.
Syria and Iran comprise one of the world’s most improbable partnerships. The two countries do not share a language. They do not share a culture. Their citizens are not of the same ethnicity. Their forms of government are, de jure, diametrically opposed to one another, and the religion of most of their inhabitants (Sunni vs. Shi’a Islam respectively) is not the same. Yet these nations today make up one of the strongest and most significant alliances in the entire Middle East. Their combined 96 million inhabitants—many of the world’s ongoing hotspots—Israel, the Caucasus, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan—making the partnership noteworthy on a global scale.

This Iran–Syria Axis, whose origins can be traced to the upheavals of the late 1970s, has gained notoriety in recent years for its increasingly brazen anti-Western rhetoric and the confident manner in which it has begun to behave in the sphere of international affairs. This paper will argue that the seemingly unlikely coalition between Syria and Iran arose out of a combination of ideological alignment, shared strategic considerations, and the need for reliable political partners.

An Unlikely Partnership

From the time of Syrian independence in 1946 until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, relations between Iran and Syria were antagonistic. Iran was firmly in the Western camp—having close relations with the United States as well as Israel—and thus naturally opposed the politics of anti-Israel, pro-Soviet Syria. Likewise, Syria viewed Iran as subservient to the United States and part of an “Iranian-Israeli hold” on the Arab world. Iran and Israel had worked together to subvert Arab governments and instigate an uprising in at least one region, and the two countries’ extensive military and economic ties marginalized their Arab neighbors. During this period, an Iranian-Syrian alliance was unlikely.

Animosity between the two countries vanished almost instantly, however, with Ayatollah Khomeini’s rise to power in 1979. The new Iranian regime’s hatred for its erstwhile allies, America and Israel, bridged the Arab/Persian and Islamist/pan-Arabist divides, since Syria also viewed the Western powers as its primary enemies during the formulation and conduct of its foreign policy. The revolutionary government of Iran obliterated the Shah’s friendly relations with the United States and Israel. Formerly Iran’s largest benefactor, the US became the “Great Satan” and was brought to its knees in the 444-day hostage crisis that accompanied the launch of the revolution, while Israel’s permanent mission in Tehran was converted into the world’s first Palestinian embassy. The policies of the new regime were remarkably in line with those of Syria that the latter became the second country officially to recognize the newborn mullahcracy, trailing only the USSR. Iran’s revolutionaries welcomed this new Arab ally with open arms, considering the relationship a vital step toward reviving interest in Arab culture and language, “the original vehicles of Islam.” Thus, the Iranian Revolution laid the foundation for what would become one of the most radical and enduring alliances in the entire Middle East.

After the transformation of Iran’s government, Syria and Iran maintained generally friendly relations until 1982, a defining year for the new partnership. Three milestone events occurred that year. First, Syria chose to become the only Arab state to support Iran actively in the Iran-Iraq War by shutting down a major Iraqi oil pipeline that passed through its territory. This decision, most likely motivated by the Syrian government’s loathing of Iraq rather than by any encouragement from Tehran, cost Saddam Hussein’s regime millions of dollars per day. As a sign of gratitude, Iran provided Syria with free oil for the remainder of the war.

The second major event in 1982 was the upturn in hostilities in Lebanon, including the Israeli invasion of the south and subsequent arrival of the US-backed multinational peacekeeping force (MNF). Partly in response to these events (and partly due to complex and nuanced desires to exert power over the tiny country), Syria and Iran both decided to begin sending significant support to Shi’a militias in Lebanon. This
was the first chance for Damascus and Tehran to coordinate their efforts more than just ideologically; military cooperation signaled a new, more serious phase of the emerging partnership.

Despite cooperation on many fronts, tensions did exist between the two governments. Their proxies in Lebanon fought two brief but brutal wars against each other by the end of the 1980s. However, they eventually decided to work together due to their vested interest in ridding Lebanon of foreigners. Iran wanted to continue its goal of “exporting the Revolution” (i.e. encouraging the rise of Islamic governments in the region) without outside interference, while Syria yearned to regain its grip over its smaller neighbor and see the Israeli military retreat to a safe distance from the Syrian frontier. Syria’s proxy, the secular Amal, known for its strong support of Lebanese Shi’as and opposition to Palestinian refugees in the country, was tasked with drumming up political support for an Israeli and MNF withdrawal (an idea to which many Lebanese were actually ambivalent at this time, given the miserable status quo ante). On the other hand the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, which is more religiously inspired and explicitly anti-Israel than Amal, began to set plans in motion to increase its military activities against the occupiers. The suicide attacks on the US Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut that ensued in April and October, respectively, were made possible in large part due to Syrian President Assad’s cooperation in allowing Hezbollah to strategize at the Iranian Embassy in Damascus. Assad’s decision to allow 500-1,500 Iranian Revolutionary Guards and untold amounts of arms to transit through his territory into Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley also aided Hezbollah’s efforts.

The third and final noteworthy event of 1982 was Iran’s support for the Syrian government’s brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the city of Hama. Significantly, this showed that Iran had a pragmatic side, able to place geopolitical realities (in this case, the necessity of maintaining friendly ties to Syria) above ideology. Granted, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Sunni origins (and reported support from Iraq) may at least partially explain its lack of enthusiastic support among the Shi'a ayatollahs, but it is still somewhat surprising that the world’s only Islamic state, whose proudly proclaimed goal was (and is) to “export the Revolution,” chose to support a secular pan-Arabist dictatorship over an organization run by its ideological cousins. Though Syrian President Assad did not publicly acknowledge or thank Iran for its tolerance of Syria’s anti-Islamist activities, the assumption that he was grateful for the health is safe. According to Iranian-American Middle East scholar Vali Nasr, the failure of the Islamic Republic to support the Brotherhood against the Baathists “earned [Khomeini] the Brotherhood’s lasting contempt.” However, this contempt appears to have eased somewhat in the years since 1982, if Iran’s vigorous support of Hamas (an offshoot of the Brotherhood) provides any indication.

These three events transformed Syrian-Iranian affinity from a merely temporary alignment of strategic interests into a hardened, durable alliance involving unspoken political (and, where Lebanon was involved, military) expectations and commitments. Following the end of hostilities in the Iran-Iraq War, commentators such as Ihsan Hijazi of The New York Times believed that the alliance between the two rogue states had lost its raison d’être and would therefore dissipate. To the chagrin of the United States and its
ally’s, however, those commentators were wrong. The long and difficult years of the early- and mid-1980s drew the two countries into a close partnership that neither had any interest in breaking. When the dogs of war returned in 1990 with Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, Syria found itself again working against its Baathist rival, allowing Iran to begin expanding its influence in Mesopotamia.14

Though the end of the first Gulf War ushered in a short period of relative peace for the Middle East, the September 11, 2001 attacks and the ensuing wars in the region drastically altered the region’s political calculus and led directly to a renewed strengthening of the Syrian-Iranian partnership. US troops surrounded Iran and President George W. Bush made many threatening speeches causing anxiety within the regime. Meanwhile Syria also had to deal with a US war to its east and increasing international pressure to pull its troops out of Lebanon to its west. Isolated by the international community for their continued support of terrorist groups, the two regimes joined together in their shared anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism.

With no one else to turn to, the relationship between the two countries has become closer today than at any point in its thirty-year history. The first foreign head of state to visit Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after his 2005 inauguration was none other than Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Since then, President Ahmadinejad has made five visits to Damascus, while Dr. Assad has flown to Tehran an additional three times.15 These repeated visits reveal the depth of the Syrian-Iranian alliance and serve the symbolic purpose of reminding the countries’ populations that their leaders—however unpopular they may be at home—have appreciable international support.

**Underlying Rationale for Cooperation**

The preceding discussion describes in detail how the Iran-Syria axis emerged. However, it does not fully explain why it emerged or why it has endured to the present day. The answer to that question is, put simply, the continuing alignment of both the strategic interests and ideology of the two countries.

Strategically, the two regimes shared goals as well as enemies, so it made sense geopolitically to join forces. As explained above, shared enmity toward Iraq, the US, and Israel as well as coordinated efforts in Lebanon formed the original foundation of the relationship in the 1980s, though the 2003 toppling of Saddam replaced that hostility with wariness of American intentions. The status of Iran and Syria as US-designated “State Sponsors of Terrorism,” combined with the countries’ precarious locations on the Iraqi border, naturally pushed the two towards each other. “Syria and Iran both have a common goal, which is not to be the next Iraq,” said Ilan Berman, Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council.16 The two nations signed a “strategic cooperation” agreement in 2004 and a treaty of mutual defense in 2006 although the timing of those proceedings may have also been influenced by Syria’s desire to distract the world from its concurrent troubles in Lebanon.17

Ideology acts as the second stimulus for the emergence of the Syrian-Iranian partnership. This is counterintuitive because Iran is an Islamic theocracy while Syria is a pan-Arabist dictatorship. The ideology in question, however, transcends the divisions between different forms of government: essentially an “anti-imperialist” front, it consists of anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism, and support of Palestinian terrorist groups.18 In the 1980s and early 1990s, a shared hatred for Iraq was so strong that it could also be considered part of this ideology rather than merely an orientation dictated by geopolitical realities.19

For Syria, anti-Zionism formed by far the largest and most important piece of its ruling ideology. Anti-Zionism became the prism through which it would view all developments in the Middle East. For example, when Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, Syrian President Hafez Assad immediately condemned the decision not as a brazen attack on his country’s closest ally in the region, but as “the wrong war at the wrong time against the wrong enemy...that would exhaust the Arabs, divide them, and divert them from the Israeli menace.”20 The vehemence of this position is explained by Syria’s position on the front line with Israel and by its desire at the time to become the unofficial leader of the Arab world.21 In sharp contrast with Syria’s response, Iran during its war with Iraq was pragmatic enough to accept arms sales from Israel. This indicates that its radical ideology was perhaps not set in stone and could be ignored or modified in sufficiently dire situations.22

Fully understanding the Syrian-Iranian relationship requires taking into account both of the factors discussed above: cooperation against shared enemies and ideological concurrence. Strategic considerations on their own, for instance, cannot
explain the formation of the alliance; if ideology were no issue, Syria would have joined forces with Iran against Iraq long before 1979.21 It was the Syrian leadership’s anti-Zionist, anti-American ideology that prevented it from joining with the Shah’s firmly Western-allied Iran. Once the Shah fell, however, the alignment of strategic interests as well as ideological beliefs between the two countries led to the near-instant creation of the alliance. The depth of this natural kinship explains the alacrity and enthusiasm with which Syria and newly-revolutionized Iran greeted each other—Iranian President Rafsanjani’s first visit abroad after taking office was to Damascus.22 This visit also explains the enduring nature of the Syrian-Iranian partnership.

Reaching the third stimulus for the creation of this relationship, Syria, long an outcast in the Arab world,23 needed a benefactor—an ideologically-aligned partner in the region more politically influential than itself. The brazen anti-Israel and anti-American rhetoric that the Iranian mullahs brought with them into the halls of power in 1979, combined with the sheer size and ample resources of Iran, made the new regime in Iran a natural fit.24

Meanwhile, Iran longed for a kindred radical regime eager to fight against Israel and its Western backers. Unlike the Shah’s focus on Iran’s ancient Persian culture, Ayatollah Khomeini’s emphasis on the Islamic component and desire to export the revolution made forging ties with Arab states in particular a top priority. Finally, the new regime wanted a bridgehead into Lebanon specifically, where it hoped to spread its influence among the country’s Shi’as.25 Syria matched all of these requirements perfectly.26

The possibility that this unique alliance is based on religion at its core could be an additional source of its lasting strength. Though most Syrians are Sunni Muslims, the ruling Assad family belongs to a small group called the Alawites. Many members of this group insist that they form a sect of Shi’ism, though this status is disputed.27 The Assads thus may see close ties with Shi’a Iran as both a way to boost their Shi’a credentials and to retain power in a land of Sunnis.28 Meanwhile, Iran considers the family of dictators a tool through which it can continue its policy of supporting and empowering Shi’as throughout the Middle East.29

The religion factor would also partially explain Syria’s decision to support Shi’a groups in Lebanon during its civil war.30 The lack of a Syrian-Iranian partnership before 1979 somewhat weakens this theory, though this void can be explained as a result of the unfavorable geopolitical conditions during that period. Overall, the Shi’a connection seems to have strengthened the Iranian-Syrian bond, even if it was not an original driver of the relationship.

**Current state of relations**

Today, Syria and Iran have an extensive, multifaceted relationship ranging from political ties to economic relations and religious pilgrimages. After Iran’s controversial elections in 2009, when millions of Iranians took to the streets in anti-government protests, Syria was one of the only countries that continued to stand by Ahmadinejad’s government.31 Syria has also been a vocal proponent of the Iranian nuclear program, insisting that Iran should be allowed to develop nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes. Interestingly, however, Iran remained silent following Israel’s bombing of the al-Kibar nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007, possibly to avoid appearing as if it had assisted Damascus with its nuclear ambitions.32 The potential for nuclear cooperation and proliferation between the two rogue states has been a consistent driving factor behind the contemporary international significance of the Iran-Syria Axis.

Meanwhile, trade between the two countries has remained brisk even in the face of punishing international sanctions. Iranian direct investment in Syria was estimated at $3 billion as of 2008. In 2007, Iran opened its first auto manufacturing plant in Syria with the goal of eventually supplying 40 percent of the Syrian automobile market. Iran has financed a new fleet of buses in Damascus Syria’s first private-sector power plant, and numerous mosques around the country.33

Cooperation agreements have been announced for 12 other realms, ranging from healthcare to information technology to housing and urban development. Tourism is also on the rise—hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims travel to Syria every year to visit holy Shi’a shrines such as the Tomb of Zaynab south of Damascus. Syria’s Shi’as also make regular pilgrimages to Qom and other revered sites in Iran.34 Iran’s dedication to Syria is best exemplified by the fact that it is investing billions of dollars in the country, as described above, even as inflation within Iran has reached dangerous levels.35
Looking ahead and concluding thoughts

As the situation stands today, the Iranian-Syrian alliance is extremely robust and appears set to endure for the foreseeable future. Pressure on the two countries from the United States and other Western countries to end their continued support of terrorist groups (and, in the case of Iran, its nuclear program) will continue to keep bilateral relations warm. In particular, the presence of American troops in the region will ensure that the two regimes maintain their close ties, both for geopolitical as well as ideological reasons. Even a complete American withdrawal and lifting of sanctions, however, would likely have little effect on the Syrian-Iranian bond, since the two rogue states have invested too much political and economic capital in each other to separate on a whim; anti-Israel rhetoric will also continue to bind the two countries together.

Of course, like all alliances, the Iran-Syria Axis is not invincible. Turkey poses one possible threat to the relationship. The term “threat” is used loosely, since Turkey has no intention of attacking or deliberately breaking up the relationship; its influence would be more indirect. As the Iranian regime continues to hemorrhage legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, Syria may decide to slowly move away from its erstwhile ally and partner with its equally powerful neighbor to the north instead. This was not an option in past decades, when fierce secularism and pro-Israel sentiment reigned supreme in Turkey and tensions with Damascus ran high. Since the election of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, Ankara has been inching its policy positions closer to those of Damascus and Tehran. In October of 2009, Turkey canceled a scheduled joint military drill with Israel and signed a cooperation agreement with Damascus the following day, indicating that a new dynamic may be at play.38

The only other way the Syrian-Iranian alliance could collapse is through regime change in either country. Though the portion of the Syrian population that supports the current alliance is unclear, Iran’s Green Revolution in the summer of 2009 revealed very strong pro-Western, anti-status quo sentiments on the part of the populace there. A collapse of the Islamic Republic’s current regime could lead to a change in geopolitical positions as sudden and drastic as that which followed the fall of the Shah three decades ago.

Though the United States should continue to support Iranian reformers and hope for such a fortuitous chain of events, the likelihood of that happening remains bleak. The fall of the Assad regime, for its part, currently appears unlikely as well. If a more democratic government were to come to power in Damascus, though, it would likely choose to sever or at least pull back from the alliance with Iran.

In light of the trials and tribulations the two regimes have gone through over the course of three decades, it is worth evaluating whether the partnership has paid off as far as advancing the countries’ national interests. Syrian assistance to Iran during the latter’s conflict with Iraq in the 1980s was critical for its survival, and Iranian economic and political support for Syria has proven to be extremely valuable. Additionally, joint Syrian-Iranian actions in Lebanon and their support of the Palestinians have succeeded in putting significant pressure on Israel, a mutual enemy. However, it is debatable whether the two countries are better off the way they are now, clinging to each other as outcasts in the international community, than they would be if they decided to cooperate with the United States and made peace with Israel. Were they to do this (an admittedly difficult course of action, considering their zealously anti-Western history), all of the sanctions and threats against them would instantly disappear, eventually earning them millions or even billions of dollars in foreign direct investment and tourism from the West.

It is curious that Ahmadinejad and Assad’s political calculus continues to value scoring political points above increasing the welfare of their constituents; to the outside observer, at least, this course of action seems irrational, leaving radical ideology as the only explicable driver of this self-destructive behavior.

Overall, the Iranian-Syrian partnership is complex and will continue to evolve as the years go on. The two nations’ political, economic and social support of one another has allowed for the creation and expansion of a formidable anti-Western front. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by either party would make Iran and Syria the kingmakers of the Middle East—a course of events the United States (and, to a lesser extent, its allies) is intent on preventing. Though the underpinnings of this cross-cultural axis are nuanced, ranging from the nebulous (ideology) to the pragmatic (geopolitical realities), ties between the countries have remained strong even through periods of great hardship. Thus, with regime change the only likely path toward a Syrian-Iranian break, the international
community faces extremely limited options: either accept the permanence of the Damascus-Tehran connection and a transformed regional balance of power, or take concerted, decisive action (in whatever form) against these most repressive of regimes. §

ENDNOTES
3 Ibid.
8 Jaber, op. cit., 81.
9 Goodarzi, op. cit., 88.
12 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, op. cit., 90.
14 Goodarzi, op. cit., 286.
19 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, op. cit., 91.
20 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, op. cit., 93.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 94.
23 Ibid., 92.
24 Ibid., 100.
26 Pan, op. cit.
28 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, op. cit., 89.
37 Macleod, op. cit.